**Love-blind**

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# Love-blind

by Dreams_of_Raven

Summary

Will met Hannibal two years ago during the investigation of the Wound Man case. They fell in love quickly and married each other a year later. Now another year had passed, they still had not realized their partners were the serial killers they admired the most.

Hannibal refrained from killing for Will, too afraid that the hideous truth would drive Will to leave him, though Will did so simply because it was impossible to use drugs to knock out his clingy husband.

The Shrike case brought Will back to the field. Getting closer to the cases made the temptation to kill irresistible to Hannibal and Will.

The question is, how long would it take for them to realize the true identities of their loves?

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Season 1 murder husbands (except they don't know they are murder husbands)

Notes

Thank you MarcelWorldsmith for being my beta!

Check out FeatheredStag's art here!

# Chapter 1

Hannibal extracted his gaze from the dreary woods before settling himself at the dining table, facing the centerpiece made of withering flowers and his long-cold food. Emptiness gnawed his stomach—the hunger he was too familiar with and...the iced feeling which he refused to name growing second by second in this tiny house, such that not even the warmth of the fire nor the company of six dogs could relieve it.

Hannibal sighed for what felt like the hundredth time. His eyes darted to his phone. His fingers twisted and clawed at its smooth surface for a call or text, but he pulled them away sternly.

Will would be back soon.

It was what he had been telling himself for the last three hours.

Laughable. It would not kill him to dine alone. He had done so every night for decades. It was only a meal.

Hannibal chewed his lips, forcing his hands to grab up his knife and fork.

The dinner tonight was meatloaf with sweet potato and broccoli. No precise cutting. No plating. He had no mood for all those performances which were only meaningful when there was an audience. Someone who loved sitting on the counter and watching him cook. Someone who loved hugging him from behind when he cooked.

Will.

Oh, Will. He missed him—he must admit it, he must say it loud to the empty house to alleviate his agony—he missed Will. He missed his smile, his scent, and his kisses. It had merely been a day and he craved to see Will as badly as the dogs did. He would whimper if it could bring his love back.

He was tamed. Will had tamed him. A ring for a collar and love, his leash.

He had already felt his heart being tugged the first time they had met. “Met” was a mild term. “Found”, more accurately, Will had *found* him.

Will came to his office on a sunny Friday morning two years ago. The scent of instant coffee, pancakes, and stray dogs had wafted ahead of the knock at the door.

Not expecting anything spectacular, Hannibal’s mind went blank as he opened the door, finding no words to describe the beauty in front of him. He hesitated to touch, to prove what he was seeing was real but too afraid he would break it. The flash of the FBI badge was like a brick to the face.

“Special Agent Graham.” Will’s gaze swept past Hannibal’s face and settled on the air above Hannibal’s shoulder, shifting his weight and tapping at his thigh, unaware. “You’re Dr. Hannibal Lecter?”

“I am.” Hannibal lowered his hand from the doorknob. The hair on his nape bristled, prickling his skin like an attacking dog.

This rose had deadly spikes, he lamented.

“What can I help you with?” He offered a polite smile, sharp teeth hidden behind his lips.

He did not make any mistake in his last kill. He did not, or there would be dozens of guns pointing at him at this second instead of a single, unfocused gaze. Single. He glimpsed at the agent’s calloused hands. Single indeed.

“I want to ask you about a former patient you might have encountered when you were a practicing physician,” Will said, studying the pattern in Hannibal’s dark-red tie.

“I have not practiced medicine in some time, but fortunately for you I have a very good memory.” Hannibal widened his smile even though he failed to capture Will’s eyes. He stepped aside. “Please, come in.”

Will nodded, more likely to himself, before stepping across the threshold. Hannibal sniffed at him when he passed through.

Whiskey. Oil. Fish. Blood.

Hannibal closed the door to lock the scents inside.

Will glanced around as he moved to the center of the room, his back muscles tensing visibly underneath his shirt.

“This is your office?” Will asked with a higher tone. “Doesn’t look like one.”

Hannibal walked towards Will. He wondered if the agent saw a cave adorned with gore and skulls. “It is important to have a relaxing environment for both the psychiatrist and patient.”

“The definition of ‘relaxing’ varies,” Will spluttered. “And to your kind, it usually means suppressing walls, crappy decorations, and a couch which looks exactly like an operating table.” He threw a sharp glance at Hannibal’s couch.

Hannibal could not resist smiling, “Are all the offices you have visited like that?”

“Worse than that.” Will squeezed the words through his teeth, turning his head at Hannibal’s direction. “So I try my best not to visit any psychiatrist’s office.”

“Yet, fate brought you here.”

“I brought myself here.” Not a romantic man then.

Hannibal smiled to himself as Will wandered to his desk.

“I thought agents work in pairs,” Hannibal said and gestured to Will to take a seat. “It could be dangerous to conduct investigations alone.”

Will gave a dry laugh. “Hence the "Special" Agent.”

Hannibal sat across Will, tilting his head in an attempt to catch Will’s eyes. “What are you special at?”

Will lifted his gaze to Hannibal’s tie knot, a twisted smile playing on his lips.

“I have ‘pure empathy’, in your word.” He threw it out. “I have excessive mirror neurons in my brain, which allows me to think like anyone. You haven’t heard of me, doctor? I’m famous in your circle. A delicious meat dropped into a pack of starving coyotes. Everyone wants a bite. So, just get it done quickly before you eat me alive.”

Hannibal tensed. How did Will know it? Not even the guests who had watched him cook and had a taste of his food could tell his secret.

Hannibal glimpsed at the scalpel on his desk.

How remarkable. It would be a shame to kill him.

Though Will did not pull out his gun and ask for Hannibal’s surrender. He only leaned back in tiredness and said, “His name was Jeremy Olmstead.”

Hannibal lowered his head, but not his guard. “Perhaps not so good a memory after all.” He wore an embarrassed smile. “ I don’t recall a patient with that name, but it sounds familiar. What happened to him?”

“Murdered.” Will’s eyes darkened under his lashes, focusing on something invisible dancing in the air. His words sounded like a leaf drifting in a river. “We think he was a victim of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“That is why he sounds familiar. It has been all over the news, especially in Tattle Crime.”

Will huffed.“Tasteless.”

Hannibal leaned forwards. “Do you have trouble with taste?”

“My thoughts are often not tasty. I doubt you'd like a taste of them.” Will warned, baring his teeth like a spooked mongoose. Adorable, yet stubborn, refusing to meet Hannibal's eyes even when ranting.

“Not fond of eye contact, are you?”

“Yes, I am on the spectrum, if that’s what you're insinuating.” Will adjusted his glasses, only making it slide down further. The upper frame blocked his mesmerizing irises. “I am not here

for you to psychoanalyze. If you want to psychoanalyze something, why don't you help me psychoanalyze the Ripper?"

It was meant to be a snide, but Hannibal obeyed happily.

"Correct me if I am wrong, I have only gathered the information from the media." He leaned forth further until his ribs pressed against the edge of his desk. "The Ripper is experienced on medical practice; he is possibly working or used to work in the field, which is why you are trying to find leads in the old medical records of his victims."

Will nodded. His jaw relaxed slightly under Hannibal's close study.

Hannibal paused for a second to suppress his glee. "He is meticulous, sophisticated. Every kill he makes is a well-planned show. He is not a sociopath. 'Psychopath' perhaps is a closer word to describe him, but he is also not one of them. No label could be applied on him. He is no everyday monster."

Will's lips twisted and failed to forbear from agreeing with him. "You do know something."

Hannibal beamed, not being able to stop peacocking. "Those people were pests to him. The dissections are to disgrace them. A public shaming. And he could not resist taking their organs as trophies."

Will's eyes sparkled. The hostility burning in them subsided, replaced instead with regard. He shifted forwards, eager for a rare, understanding mind. "Organs are not only trophies to him." However, he shook his head quickly, scratching his nape. "I shouldn't discuss the case with other people."

"Whom am I going to tell?" Hannibal encouraged him. "All words spoken in this room would stay in this room."

"*If* we were patient and doctor." Will harrumphed. "You are not and you will never be my shrink."

"Not your psychiatrist, no."

Will looked up, frowning at the upward curve on Hannibal's lips. Hannibal pretended he did not notice it.

"Two minds are better than one," he said. "How do you see the Ripper, Mr. Graham?"

"Just call me Will." Will fidgeted and took a breath. "He is elegant and graceful. An artist."

Hannibal's lashes fluttered.

"Cutting people open on the operating tables is not enough to satisfy his hunger." Will licked his lips, making them shine like the cut inside of a peach. "He has shifted his interest from saving lives to destroying them. He has found beauty in death, turning those he deems ugly into art."

Will stared at the back of his hands, unfocused. The seas in his darkened eyes churned and coiled. “He sees them as pigs to be slaughtered. Taking the organs away because he thinks they don’t deserve them.”

Will raised his gaze and finally met Hannibal’s eyes. It was merely a glance, but it pierced Hannibal’s heart like the cruelest arrow.

“You have a beautiful mind,” Hannibal breathed.

Will widened his eyes as a pinkish tinge bloomed on his cheeks. He tried to hide it with a nervous laugh. His gaze skittered around, not daring to look at Hannibal anymore.

“This is the first time I get a compliment,” he murmured.

Hannibal resisted the urge to stroke Will’s face. “What do you usually hear?”

Will sighed. “Fear.”

“They must be blind,” Hannibal said. "Fearing your beauty like the cavemen fearing sunlight.”

Will blinked. His blush deepened, lashes trembling, and Hannibal's heart ached.

“So...you don’t remember Jeremy Olmstead?” Will shifted in his seat, swaying almost. “He’d fallen out of a tree-blind five years ago while bow hunting. Stuck an arrow through his leg. Doctor of record was a resident surgeon, but you were on duty in the ER that night.”

Hannibal barely listened to it, busy studying the way Will’s lips shaped around each word. The good thing about Will’s avoidance of eye contact was that he could drink him in without Will’s notice.

“Was I?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded and his curls danced slightly. “Your name was on an admissions log.”

Hannibal waited for a moment and stood. “I kept detailed journals during those days. If you like, I can get them for you. Perhaps you will find something helpful.”

He climbed the ladder to the mezzanine. His heart beat fast.

Will was too close. He was only two steps away from catching Hannibal, and he would catch him given enough time or clues.

He should kill him. Right now.

But what did he truly desire? Delicacy and arts? Revenge and cleansing the world?

After all these years of self-indulgence, his heart was still an empty, craving chasm. He wanted to have something to fill it, he wanted to have someone to fill it.

Love, the most mundane and cliché thing, was what he truly craved.

Will could possibly be the only person in this world who could see him and understand him. But could he accept what Hannibal was? Could he?

“It takes years of training to be a surgeon,” Will said, raising and looking around to ease his discomfort at the silence. “Why did you change careers?”

Hannibal had answered the same kind of questions countless times, though he was glad Will had asked so he could keep them talking, keep Will here longer, at least for a little while.

He kept the smile in his heart as he leaned to the edge to watch Will exploring the environment. “I could not save someone. That was when I decided to start a new life.”

“You worked at the ER. It has to happen from time to time.”

“It happened one time too many. I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts. I fix minds instead of bodies and no one has died as a result of my therapy.”

Will paced around the desk. He tapped the wood and reached to the scalpel lying next to the pencil. “Yet you still keep a scalpel. A souvenir from your old life?”

“It was for sharpening pencils only.”

Will hummed. “You draw.”

“There are some drawings over there. You may have a look at them, if you'd like.” Hannibal grabbed the book and descended the stairs.

Will dropped down the blade and went to the table. The Wound Man breathed beneath a few pieces of thin paper.

Hannibal approached without a sound, watching Will’s every move. Though Will’s attention quickly shifted to the other side of the room.

“You play harpsichord.” Will turned and raised a brow. “What? You thought I would say it is a piano? I’m not a philistine, Doctor. I still know a bit of music.”

Hannibal smiled. “Do you play?”

“Piano.” Will returned to his seat. “Began when I was very young. They said I had talent.”

Hannibal sat back. “You chose a different path instead,” he said so he would not abruptly ask Will to perform a piece for him.

The confidence on Will fled. His eyes hid away and he twisted his sleeve slightly. “‘Cause my father wanted me to do something more practical. Like fixing boat motors.”

Will's thread-bare, ill-fitting clothing suggested a lower class, or at the very least, blue collar background. Not that Hannibal cared.

“You chose to be a FBI agent however.”

“Catching killers is more satisfying,” Will said as Hannibal expected, but it still brought a tinge of disappointment to him.

Hannibal forced himself to nod. “It saves lives.”

Will’s gaze fluttered to find his courage. “I like understanding what the killers want. It’s like solving a puzzle no one can solve.”

Hannibal surveyed Will’s expression till his gaze pressed Will onto the back of the chair. He evinced a friendly smile and pushed the records towards the agent. “Let’s see if I can help you solve it.”

Will flipped the pages and placed the records down, disappointed.

“Thank you for your time, doctor, I have to go now.” Will stood and Hannibal followed quickly.

“Please take my card, though I am sure you already have my contact information.” Hannibal showed his most alluring smile. “Call me if you need my help. You are always welcome.”

“Ok, uh, thanks.” Will tugged the card into his shirt pocket without even glancing at it, but Hannibal was not a man easily defeated..

“Let me walk you out.” He offered, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder blade.

Will tensed and blushed at it but made no protest.

“Ah,” Hannibal said as they stopped in front of the door. “It is nearing lunch time, would you care to join me before continuing your investigation?”

Will turned to face him, looked into his eyes and then at his lips, speculating the intention behind them. The curious gesture nearly tempted Hannibal forwards, but Will huffed at the last moment. “I don’t find you that interesting.”

Hannibal tugged up his lips. “You will.”

Will crossed his arms. “Let’s see.”

And they had their first date at a nearby restaurant.

After a few more dates Will teased Hannibal about his blatant sexual desire for him and called him a “dirty old man”. Hannibal responded by following that said desire to kiss Will. An innocent kiss, Hannibal argued as Will protested with a deep brush.

They married each other a year later, and now, another year had passes, and Will still didn't know.

Hannibal had put all his effort into hiding the truth from Will. He would admit he had planned to corrupt Will, to bend him, to mold him, but his love for Will brewed stronger and deeper every time he saw or even only thought about Will. Soon he found he could not bear the thoughts of hurting Will.

Will understood him in every way, but he didn't need to understand his dark nature. He didn't need to know.

Hannibal loved him just the way he was. Pure, innocent, lovely. He did not want to stain the only bright thing in his life with blood and darkness.

He could not risk it. Freedom was not what he feared to lose, Will was.

Will must not discover the truth.

The Ripper had stopped after killing his eighth victim, and Hannibal barely killed now.

A beast like him was impossible to tame, yet, tamed he was.

Hannibal sighed at his empty plate. He tidied up and washed the utensils, tracing Will's smile in his mind. He nearly jumped and broke the dish when the dogs barked and rushed to the door. Will.

Hannibal whirled around but quickly forced himself to wipe off every drop of water on his hands to let himself appear less like a needing puppy.

The car door opened and slammed as he hurried to the porch.

"Will."

"Hannibal." Will smiled as sweet as always. "Um, can you keep the dogs inside?"

Hannibal tilted his head at the odd request but urged the dogs back nonetheless, closing the door carefully not to bump into their inquisitive noses. He finally spotted another passenger in Will's car after he turned back. How would he be surprised?

"Will."

Will gave an impish smile and let the muddy mutt out, who hid behind Will's legs while whimpering.

Hannibal stood still. He wished he was dressed in his suit instead of his sweater and pajama pants so he would look more authoritative.

He put his hands on his hips. "I believe I have to suspect that Jack Crawford asking you to help with a case was an excuse for you to come home late with another stray."

"That is not a lie." Will pouted. "I found him on my way back. He's starving. I couldn't leave him there. He's a good boy." He ruffled the dog's muddy fur, chuckling as the dog licked his palms. "You're a good boy, aren't you, Winston?"

“You already named him,” Hannibal said dryly.

Will straightened himself, still glued to the newest member of their family. “You can name the dogs if you don’t give them horrible names like Dante or Artemis.”

Hannibal walked to Will. “Giving a name to someone is giving them a lifelong blessing, hoping them to have the bravery, beauty, or intelligence the name implies. Names are powerful. Like yours.”

Will grinned under his lips. “So you’re ok with Winston?”

Hannibal tore his gaze off from his love and scrutinized the mutt. Winston tilted his head at him with watery eyes and floppy ears.

Hannibal closed his eyes. “As long as you are happy, my love.”

Winston was a decent dog as Will said. He sat patiently when Will bathed and toweled him, and he did not bark at other dogs for once.

Will arranged the room next to their bedroom for Winston. Will had used to sleep in the living room with his dogs. Moving upstairs was one of the changes he had made since they began dating, like the upgraded utensils in his kitchen for Hannibal.

They should live together like a typical couple did, but they both liked having some private time, and Will liked the woods and rivers of Wolf Trap, Hannibal could not deprive the nature from him. He had been considering somewhere between, a house in the outskirts, large enough for Will’s growing pack and fishing gear and his arts and books. He had not told Will yet.

Hannibal spent a while with Winston when Will took a shower. He let Winston lick his fist and rewarded the dog with a few pieces of sausage.

When the smells of shampoo and shower gel gradually faded in the cold air, he went to prepare a cup of hot cocoa for Will.

“You know how to spoil me.” Will sat at the edge of the bed with him and sipped the beverage with a smile sweeter than it.

Hannibal held Will into his arms and buried his nose on Will’s neck. The unfamiliar scents were faint now, but not completely gone. Cat, deer, and death. Where had his mongoose been?

“What did Jack want from you?” Hannibal tugged a curl behind Will’s ear when Will finished half of the cocoa. “Did the Ripper strike again?”

Will shook his head. “You’ve heard of the missing girls, right? They disappeared over weekends and never came back, not even a strain of hair left. I doubt we would find their bodies.”

“You think it is a serial killer rather than an abductor?”

“The girls are definitely dead. The person who kidnaps them intends to kill them.”

“He has no plan to display the body. Attention is not what he aims for,” Hannibal said. “Are there any connections between the girls?”

Will nodded while clearing his throat. “They are at the same age, having the same hair and eye color, same height, and same weight.”

“They resemble someone special to the killer. He would kill her, sooner or later.” Hannibal let his mind wander for a second, imaging himself killing Will’s doppelgangers to claim him his, but it was vapid and contemptible. Nothing could compare with his love, and Will was already his. “He is trying to gain control. He wants to claim her his, or more likely, he is losing her.”

Will nodded. “And the number went up this morning. We went to the house of the latest victim. He’d taken her there, killed her in his place, and guess what, he’d put her back and tucked her in her bed.”

Hannibal leaned closer. Will laughed like he got a fat fish hooked.

“It is an apology,” he explained.

“For taking her life?”

“For his inability to show her his love.”

“Love.” Hannibal took Will’s hand after Will put down the mug. “Is it a sexual one?”

“Can only be sure after the dissection. But I didn’t feel it. It’s not like that. He’s not loving them in this way.”

“A family love?”

“Maybe she is his sister or daughter. I don’t know.” Will rubbed his face. The shadow lying beneath his eyes lingered.

“Rest now then.” Hannibal squeezed Will’s hand. “Leave it tomorrow. It can wait.” He lured Will to his chest and the bed.

Will’s lashes fluttered to fight against the somnolence, his gaze misty already. “He placed the girl back. He knew we would find it. He knows he is going to be caught. He’s going to kill again soon.”

“Not tonight. Don’t think about him anymore.” Hannibal stroked Will’s face and ran his fingers along Will’s neck to tug out the silver necklace Will hung his wedding ring on. He kissed the ring reverently.

Will did not wear his ring often, too afraid to leave stains or scratches on it. He would rather keep it close to his heart.

“Think about me.” Hannibal kissed Will. “Think only about me.”

“Possessive.” Will closed his eyes as Hannibal covered them with a blanket. “How was your day?”

“Uneventful.”

Will gave a soft hum.

Hannibal turned off the light. He watched Will under the fragmented moonlight, breaths slowing steadily in his arms.

“I missed you, my love.” Hannibal whispered when placing a kiss on Will’s forehead.

He drifted into slumber soon, which did not last long as Will started twisting blindly and gave him an elbow on his ribs. He stirred. The bed was empty already.

“Will?”

He followed the light and the sound of water to the bathroom.

Will stood before the mirror, his eyes round and red, water and sweat dripping on his face. His arms were trembling, barely supporting his upper body over the counter. He shivered when Hannibal touched his back. Hannibal shushed him, slowly bringing him into his arms. Will grabbed his sweater tightly.

Nightmares had never left Will. Most of the time Will would only wake and calm himself quickly, but Hannibal would find him scared and whining when he got too close to the minds of other killers. No need to ask if it was the dead girl who had haunted Will in his dream.

The cases themselves were usually not the problem. They were simple, pale. Will would not dwell on them for a long period of time. However, this was an active killer. He would kill and haunt Will until he got caught.

Hannibal hugged Will tighter. He should be the only one who could occupy his love’s precious mind.

“Let’s go back to sleep.” He pecked Will’s tensed cheek, weighing the option of bringing the Ripper back.

# Chapter 2

Will groaned and kicked at the other side of the bed, unsurprisingly finding his husband absent.

He gave out a louder complaint, smacked the blaring clock, and stumbled out of the bed, dragging his bare feet to the bathroom.

He splashed water to his face and buried himself onto his towel, slowly breathing in and out before he rose to meet his reflection. His hair curved at all the possible angles; his eyelids struggled to batter the tiredness away. The persistent darkness wreathed in his dilated pupils.

He looked at the girl in his eyes. She screamed beneath his hands, crawling, begging. Antlers pierced her chest and stomach. Blood and guts spilled like beautiful ribbons.

Shiver ran through Will's whole body. He smiled.

He had had a wonderful dream last night.

He had not killed for months.

Life with Hannibal was dazzling. He still felt like he was living in his wildest dream having himself married to this man. He had never met someone like Hannibal. Gentle, graceful, intelligent, suave… All of the compliments in the world combined was not enough to describe him. It was unbelievable that Hannibal had asked him for a date the first time they met and asked him to marry him a year later. It was not too fast though. He loved Hannibal as Hannibal loved him. They were meant to be together.

Will smiled and kissed his ring, turning back to the bedroom to get his clothes. Plaid shirt as usual. Hannibal wanted to fill his wardrobe with pretentious suits, but he had warned him that he would burn every one of them.

It was one of the minor things in their marriage he wanted to complain about, as well as the pretentious social meetings Hannibal would pester him for weeks to join, and the inconvenience for him to hunt.

Although they were living in their own houses, they spent almost all of the nights together. Don't get him wrong, he enjoyed Hannibal's company, but he needed time to plan and prepare, and it was an impossible task to drug Hannibal when he had that damn cancer-detecting nose.

Will huffed.

He did not kill often even back in his solitary days. He had his own principle—criminals only. Animal abusers and murders were on the top of his killing list.

Depending on his moods, sometimes he would deploy the styles of other killers and disguise their corpses as ones of their victims, while sometimes he would hang them up and gut them like dead fish.

The FBI called him the “Fisherman” for the fishing lines and hooks he used, but he considered himself something more dynamic and feral, a shapeshifter, a soul eater.

The murder cases normally could be served as scraps to feed his beast, but now the ultimate prey dangled in front of his nose. A starving beast like him had no strength to resist it. His darkness shrieked for a kill.

Not the time, dear, not yet.

Hannibal was as clever as he was. He would suspect something if he found Will disappeared the whole night and a body appeared the next morning.

“Will?” Hannibal’s faint voice drew him back. “You would be late if you did not get up now.”

“I’m up. Coming!”

*That was why predators lived alone.*

Yes, and lonely.

Will tutted to himself. He finished the routine quickly and went downstairs. Hannibal was setting the table. Will hugged him from behind.

“Morning.”

“Good morning, mongoose,” Hannibal said briskly. “Did you sleep well?”

Not well. Great.

“You know.” Will let go of his husband. Quite troublesome that he needed to feign to be troubled by his dreams and the cases, but it was nice to see his husband care about him.

Hannibal held his cold hands. “Do you want to talk about your dream?”

The gentleness in Hannibal’s eyes always tempted Will to spill the truth.

Hannibal would understand him, he had the same sense of dark humour and was endeared to twisted minds. But it was exactly because Hannibal was too gentle to him, he could not bring himself to hurt him.

Will sighed and pulled the chair. He said when Hannibal sat opposite to him, “I dreamt of the girl.” He fumbled with his knife, the shining blade calling to his beast.

“The dead girl.”

Will flexed his hands. “Not dead yet. Dying. I was killing her.”

Hannibal covered his hand and waited till he looked up. “You are aware of that nightmare is a warning sign of you going too far.”

“Jack won’t let me go.” Will pulled out his excuse. “Not until I find the killer.”

“There are newborn monsters everyday. Jack will never let you go.” Hannibal squeezed his hand. “You need to learn how to say no to Jack. Never feed a stray, Will, or it will come back for more.”

Will laughed at the sinister whisper. “Sounds like you’re referring to the real dogs.”

“I am.” Hannibal returned the smile. “I have begun to worry we would only be able to live together when we were in our graves.”

“I’m going to be buried with my dogs. No space for you, husband.” Will kicked Hannibal’s leg.

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, but his attempt to give Will a reproaching look failed completely the next second as a smile broke his face. He brought Will’s hand to his lips and planted a soft kiss on Will’s ring finger. “No need to wait for the death, dogs have already parted us.”

“We have never been together.” Will smirked.

Will never believed in fate, but he found he probably should when he pushed open the door of Jack’s office.

“Ah, Will, come in.” Jack beckoned to him as he stiffened by the door.

He swallowed dryly before he could haul his legs forwards, his eyes fixed at another person in the room, who stood to face him with the smuggest smile in the world.

“Dr. Lecter, this is special agent Will Graham,” Jack said. “Will, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

“I know.” Will huffed. Jack raised an eyebrow so he added, “I helped you to investigate the medical records of Ripper’s victims two years ago, right? I sought his help as his name was in the records.” And they got married afterwards.

They had not told many people they were married to each other. Hannibal liked keeping Will all to himself, and Will hated gossip. Everyone was desperately craving to know who had the ability to catch the heart of the most unattainable doctor in town.

Will squinted his eyes as Hannibal offered him a hand with the utmost elegance.

“I am flattered that you remember me, Mr. Graham.” Hannibal put on a perfect smile. “It is my pleasure to meet you again. Fate has tied us together twice.”

Will rolled his eyes in his head. “Nice.” He shook his husband’s hand with no enthusiasm.

Hannibal held Will slightly longer than necessary. Will worried if he was going to kiss his hand right in front of Jack.

Hannibal withdrew finally. His fingers brushed Will’s palm in a teasing way, at which Will twisted his lips.

The three of them sat down.

Hannibal attempted to catch Will’s hand when Jack had his head turned away. Will smacked Hannibal’s arm and kicked at the side of Hannibal’s leg to teach him a lesson.

With a silent sigh, Hannibal looked back at the pin board.

“How many confessions?” He asked.

“Twelve dozen last time I checked,” Jack said. “None of them had any details until this morning. And then they all had details. Some genius in Duluth PD took a photograph of Elise Nichols' body with his cell phone, shared it with his friends, and then Freddy Lounds posted it on Tattle Crime.”

“Tasteless.” Will had the need to sneer every time he heard of it.

“Do you have trouble with taste?” Hannibal looked at him, amused.

*Oh, here we go again.*

Will placed down his mug with a thud. “My thoughts are often not tasty.”

“Every person has their own preference for taste.” Hannibal turned his whole body to Will and even ogled him now. “Not fond of eye contact, are you?”

Will snorted.

“I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.”

That was enough.

“Whose profile are you working on?” Will darted his sharp gaze at Hannibal and Jack. “Whose profile is he working on?” He stood when Hannibal opened his mouth for a makeshift apology. “Don’t psychoanalyze me. You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed. Now, excuse me, I have to go give a lecture on psychoanalyzing.” He clutched back his jacket and stormed out before he could not keep his laughter.

His smile stretched wide on his face like a lazy cat. He could not get it off even after he walked a long way back to his office. It got worse when Hannibal appeared and peeped into the room.

“Fuck off.” Will dragged down his lips.

Hannibal tilted his head. “I believe it is highly inappropriate to say that in an institute, Professor Graham.”

“Oh, I am very sorry, please forgive me, Doctor Lecter.” Will placed a hand over his chest.

“No need to apologize.” Hannibal approached him. “I should be the one apologizing. I am sorry for my analytical ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you will tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly.”

Will harrumphed and extracted his hand from Hannibal’s grip. “Just keep it professional.”

Hannibal widened his smile. “Or we could socialize like adults, god forbid we become friendly.”

“I think you have psychoanalyzed me *deep* enough to know I loathe socializing with anyone.”

Hannibal raised a brow. “Even with your husband?”

Will raised his chin, smirking as Hannibal stared at his throat. “Even with my husband.”

Pain flashed on Hannibal’s face as he struggled to keep on playing, and he eventually succumbed to his desire and bent down to kiss Will.

“How about lunch?” He caressed Will’s cheek. “I suppose you will not oppose it.”

Will hated Hannibal doing that with his enamoured look. He took off his glasses and took his time to fold it. “I was planning to have a burger and fries.”

“‘Was.’”

Will pursed his lips. “Where?”

Hannibal took him to the restaurant they frequented. A wide grin hung on Hannibal’s face as if begging him to ask about it. Will could only withstand it for a few minutes.

“Stop smiling at me for nothing. That’s creepy.”

“Not for nothing. For you.” Hannibal even giggled in a silly way. Will groaned but the mirth had infected him.

“Once again we find our paths crossed.” Hannibal took Will’s hand into his, his ring shining under the sunlight. “We are destined to be together, Will.”

Will shied away. “We both know that. No need to prove it.”

Hannibal nodded, and he said after taking a forkful of salad, “I was wondering what would happen if it was the first day we met.”

“Simple. You’d poke me, apologize to me, and you’d use all your methods to court me as you did and always do.”

“Anything to win your heart.”

“You are giving me a toothache.”

“Am I?” Hannibal looked up in feigned surprise. “Let me see your teeth. Open up.”

Will scowled and shove Hannibal’s hand away with a blush. He sipped his water and cleared his throat. “You said I should learn to say no to Jack, but you didn’t say no when he asked for your help.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I only agreed with consulting on cases.”

Will poked his food with his fork. “Jack wants to find me a paddle so I won’t get lost once he pushes me into dark places.”

“Do you think you need a paddle?”

Will reached for Hannibal’s hand. “I have you already.”

Hannibal smiled as well, relaxed and—of course—content to see Will relying on him.

Will drew back. There was no point arguing about that. He knew that Hannibal was a possessive bastard when he had said yes to his proposal.

“Well, at least I can talk about the details of the case with you… Elise Nichols’ chest and abdominal had penetrative wounds, in which we found antler velvet. She was mounted on a wall of antlers where she was supposed to be butchered like the other girls.” He lowered his gaze, looking into the girl’s eyes. Copper replaced the scents of food. “He cut her open, took her liver, and put it back. There was a problem with the meat. She had liver cancer. He could not eat her like that.”

Hannibal paused his silverware. “You think he is a cannibal.”

Will nodded behind his palms.

“It is a rare monster,” Hannibal said. “Have you encountered a cannibal before?”

“This is the first.” Oh, he wanted to kill like him so much. Take them, gut them, consume them.

“Eat your love, and the soul of your love will breathe with you, live inside you, be fused with you forever.” Hannibal leaned forth, clasping his hands together. “That is why you would

never find the bodies of the girls; he consumes every part of them."

"That's also why he put the last girl back. He's upset. He couldn't show her he loved her the way he did with the others...and his daughter. It's her he wants. He's killing girls that look like her so he doesn't kill her. But he will soon. He know we're coming." Will clenched his jaw. "What kind of love is it? How can someone want to kill the person they love the most?" He rubbed his face as if it could reshape himself to be the killer. Hannibal grabbed his wrists.

"Don't go too deep, Will. You would not want to get lost." Hannibal squeezed Will's hand, too hard and Will winced. But Will liked it. It was grounding, safe.

Hannibal relaxed slightly as he succeeded drawing Will's eyes to him. "Your job is to catch the killers, not to understand them."

Will laughed dryly. "I need to understand them to catch them."

"Don't go alone then. I am always here for you."

"I know."

They looked at each other for a while. Hannibal reached Will's cheek. "Will you come over tonight?"

"I want to, but I can't leave Winston alone the whole night. And you have an appointment early tomorrow, don't you?" Will chuckled as Hannibal sighed loudly.

Will considered to have a quick hunting trip tonight when he drove back home, but he did mean it when he said he needed to take care of Winston, and he needed an undisturbed night, no phone call, no text, and absolutely no surprise visit which Hannibal loved paying. Sometimes his husband was quite annoying.

Will gave a fond sigh and shook his head to shake off his smile. He told his beast to wait, like he had been training Winston to wait for his food. The stray was clearly the more obedient one.

Winston must have had a home before. He knew basic commands and he had had a leash on his neck when Will had found him. Was it his choice to run away? Did his owner tie him up and leave him to his fate?

Will patted the dog's head. "I wish you could speak sometimes," he murmured. "Tell me and I'd take care of whoever left you out there." He clenched his fists and forced them to relax.

Despite his effort to clean his mind, his darkness refused to relent like an unteachable child. It squirmed behind his eyelids, crying, howling, splashing blood over his mind until a phone call from Jack ripped his dream.

Will tried to gather back his broken dream on his way to Minnesota, too distracted by it that when the sea of golden grass shrouded him, he got lost for a moment. He thought he had slipped back into the deepest part of his mind where all the morbid and beautiful things lay.

He stumbled past Jack.

The flock of ravens flew and returned, perching back on bare skin where the dead girl was draped over a bed of antlers, ribs opened and heart revealed, hair and limbs draping down in the rising sunlight. Autumn flowers bloomed in her shadow. She was an animal sacrifice.

“He wanted her found this way.” His voice quivered, nearly inaudible to himself. This girl may look like the other missing girls, but she was not a work of the same killer. The Shrike would not give his love away, not to mention opening them up and dumping them in the wild for animals to gnaw and people to watch. “It’s petulant. I almost feel like he’s mocking her.”

“He took her lungs,” Brian said. “ I think she was still alive when he cut them out.”

Will strained his ears at the cold air to find the echoes of the girl’s scream. He tugged the rubber band of his glove, suppressing his urge to run his fingers along the branches of the antlers. His darkness threatened to burst out from his skin, twisting his lips to bare his teeth, wanting to claw and bite.

“Our cannibal loves women.” He focused on each syllable in his words. “He doesn’t want to destroy them. He wants to consume them. Keep some part of them inside. This girl’s killer thought she was a pig.”

“You think this is a copycat?” Jack went closer to him and he took a step away, but the temptation was too immense that he could not shift his gaze away from the corpse.

“The cannibal who killed Elise Nichols had a place to do it and no interest in...in field kabuki. He has a house, or two, or a cabin with an antler room. He has a daughter. She's the only child. She's leaving home. He can't stand the thought of losing her. She's his golden ticket.” Will shivered and threaded back, yet Jack did not let it go.

“What about the copycat?”

Will ground his teeth. Couldn’t he see? See?

“He’s an intelligent psychopath. Sadistic. No traceable motive. No patterns. He may never kill like this again.”

Jack still stared at him. He had no idea how Jack got his job in the first place.

“Have Dr. Lecter draw up a psychological profile. You seem very impressed with his opinion.” He snorted and escaped before he lost his grip on his beast’s collar.

“They call him the ‘Minnesota Shrike.’”

Will huffed but pulled himself away from the back of the couch to take the glass offered to him. He whirled it softly and sipped the wine, waiting for Hannibal to join him.

“You read too much Tattle Crime,” he said. One thing he still could not figure out about his husband was why Hannibal would even read something so sordid and atrocious.

“I heard it on news first.”

“‘First.’”

Hannibal smiled and tucked his arm around Will’s shoulders. Will leaned into Hannibal’s chest habitually, the familiar scent tempting him to close his eyes.

“I admit I read Freddie Lounds’ article afterward.” Hannibal kissed Will’s curls.

Will nuzzled his nose against Hannibal’s sweater. “What else did she write?”

“That he mounted the girl on a stag head and took her lungs.”

“I don’t think that was him.” Will straightened himself. “He loves these girls. He is merciful, caring. The Copycat is far more professional, fiendish. He sees them as pigs to be slaughtered. He took her lungs while she was still alive.”

“Which would require a pair of skillful hands.” Hannibal took Will’s hand.

Will let their fingers entwine, studying the power and elegance of Hannibal’s hands, which now would only be covered with oven mitts and tomato sauce instead of surgical gloves and human blood. Will mused on if Hannibal still remembered how to cut people open and if his hands would smell of fresh copper all the time when he had been working at the hospital.

“Could be a doctor,” he said, sipping the wine. “The cuts were steady, showing no hesitation. It’s not the first time he’s killed, but the first time he’s killed for someone else.” He stared at the ripples in his glass. “A gift.”

“A gift?” Hannibal repeated in slight surprise. “To whom?”

“This killer is a top predator, but he’s lonely. He wants someone who can understand him. That display was almost yelling ‘look at me’. I could taste the sour jealousy in it. It was a gift to show them he is way better than the Shrike, to catch their attention. It was also a test to see if they can see him and appreciate his work. Pretty much the flowers and chocolate before the first date.” It reminded him of their first date. Though even without flowers and chocolate, Hannibal had intrigued Will to find him interesting enough for a date.

Will bit back his smile. “It felt like a gift to me.”

Hannibal swallowed. “What made you think that?”

Will shrugged. “I’m, uh, infamous for my empathy. I don’t know… It felt like he was also trying to show me the Shrike. Maybe it was just for someone else.” He shook his head. “He reminds me of someone. With that huge pride and pretentiousness.”

Hannibal blinked at him. “I hope you are not implying me.”

Will paused and laughed. “I am not talking about you! Are you finally admitting you are pretentious?” He poked Hannibal’s chest, smirking.

Hannibal eyed Will, but wrinkles appeared around the corners of his eyes. “It is what you always call me.”

“Because you are.” Will sighed. “I am talking about another killer who also has a habit of harvesting organs and transforming corpses into art.”

Hannibal turned to face the fireplace as well. He wetted his lips with the alcohol, approaching slowly. “There is only one killer whom you consider as an artist.”

“The Ripper.”

Hannibal put down his glass. “The Ripper has been dormant for two years. Are you certain it is him?”

“I...have a faint feeling.” Will stared at the air, unfocused. “It feels like he’s hiding. Hm, he’s always hiding behind the veil, but this time he is hiding behind a curtain. A thick, heavy curtain, not a single ray of light could penetrate. But...I just feel something is off.”

Hannibal lowered his eyes, pensive, then he said, “I would not be surprised if you said you could predict the next lottery result.”

Will drew a breath to play along. “You know, all the casinos have banned me.”

“I am proud of you.” Hannibal pecked Will’s cheek hard and schooled his expression. “Have you told Jack about your theory?”

Will shook his head, although he would love to see horror creeping all over Jack’s face. “One cannibal is already too much for him to handle.”

Hannibal watched him carefully. “You are going to let the Ripper go. It is unlike you.”

It would be unlike him if he wanted to catch the killer he appreciated the most. Will shook his head.

“He is uncatchable. He is everywhere and nowhere.” He put down the half-empty glass and stretched with a yawn before slumping back into Hannibal’s arms. “Bev found a piece of metal on Elise Nichols’ clothes. So tomorrow I need to go back to check the construction sites that use that kind of metal.”

Hannibal tightened the hug and eventually gave a reluctant nod. “Don’t let me keep you then. Go home and rest earlier.”

“What? You don’t want me to stay?” Will showed a coy smile which drew Hannibal to kiss him instantly.

“I do. However, are you sure you can leave Winston alone?”

“I thought you would want my house to be destroyed by my crazy pack so I would have to move in with you.” Will circled his arms around Hannibal’s waist. “Enough of me. How was your day, husband?”

Hannibal pecked Will’s cheek. “Uneventful.”

“You say that everyday.”

“Because you have forbidden me to talk about those ‘dumb and pretentious things.’”

Will laughed and eyed Hannibal suggestively. “Do you want me to make your day less uneventful?” He just finished the last word and Hannibal already leaned over him to devour his lips.

“Go upstairs and wait for me,” Hannibal said against his quicken breath.

Will wobbled upstairs and threw his clothes all over the floor just to annoy his fussy husband, though it was the last thing Hannibal would concern when he was lying on the bed, naked and hard.

“I want to draw you like this.” Hannibal towered over Will immediately, lips and teeth aiming at the skin on Will’s neck.

“Really? You look like you want to eat me more.”

“I do.” Hannibal smirked and went down directly to Will’s cock, wrapping his lips around the tip without giving a warning.

Will gasped and groaned, his legs tensed in reflex for a kick. Hannibal grabbed his thighs and pushed them apart to sink down further.

“Jump straight to the main course. What a gentleman you are.” Will cursed in his uneven breath, biting his lips to control himself.

Hannibal responded with only a hum. He took Will all in and sucked Will hard as he drew back.

Will’s self-control was shattered into powder in an instant. He moaned and wiggled his hips to thrust, but Hannibal pressed him down firmly and sucked him harder, drawing out a loud whimper from his throat.

It drained all his strength. Will’s hands fell from Hannibal’s hair, his legs trembled, and he could barely get air into his lungs. He had no will to resist when Hannibal reached his hole.

Moaning became the only thing he could do. He whined when the fingers brushed his prostate, burning him hotter and hotter.

He hated being so sensitive to Hannibal's touches. Once Hannibal had made him come simply by teasing his hole, though he would not say he did not enjoy that.

"Stop torturing me…" He wailed as Hannibal rubbed his prostate and his cock at the same time. Precum dribbled along his shaft. He tried to kick Hannibal but he could only tremble and curve his toes.

Hannibal finally showed some mercy to him, letting him go to undress himself.

Will regained his strength after a few deep breaths. He wasted no time and pounced on Hannibal to tackle him down to the bed.

Hannibal merely looked at him with a smile, devoted and pliant. Will suspected that Hannibal would not even give a struggle if Will took out a knife and sliced his throat. He would only look at Will, blinkless, letting the image of his love brand on his retina and etch his soul.

"Will?"

Will blinked.

"You looked lost," Hannibal said.

Will shook his head. "Just thinking about what kind of monsters would have the cruelty to kill their love."

Hannibal studied him, amused. "You are fantasizing about killing me. How would you do it?"

Will huffed. "Normal people will freak out and kick me off the bed right now."

"I am not a normal man." Hannibal pulled Will down for a passionate kiss, turning over to hold Will beneath him.

Will let out a soft groan as Hannibal's clothed cock ground against him, dizzy in the escalating heat.

"How would you kill me, Will?" Hannibal left kisses on Will's neck and chest. "Would you draw out your gun and end me with a shot?

Will swallowed at the sharp sound from Hannibal's zipper. Excitement glued his eyes at Hannibal's crotch. "Guns aren't intimate."

"You would use your hands?" Hannibal spread Will's legs and rubbed his cock at Will's hole.

"Ah, yes, yes."

Hannibal thrust in and Will nearly sobbed, clutching hard reflexively.

"You would strangle me? Squeeze out whines from me and feel my pulses wither beneath your hands?"

“I also want to see you bleed.” Will panted. Hannibal’s cock stretched him wider, he clawed at the sheet helplessly. “Fuck. That’s not a suitable topic during sex.”

“It isn’t? You seem more excited than usual.” Hannibal brushed Will’s tip which instantly oozed more precum. “There is no need to feel troubled about it. Some might say sex and killing are the same. Primal. Pleasurable. One dominating another.”

Will bit his tongue to prevent himself blurting out and asking if Hannibal would like to kill people too. “And I will definitely kill you if you keep talking instead of fucking me.”

Hannibal hummed and began thrusting. It did not take a while for Will to lose all his words except Hannibal’s name. He whined and sobbed, struggling beneath the strong hands on his hips. The waves hit him and drowned him. It was like Hannibal was trying to kill him slowly with each thrust. He begged for the end and his plea turned into a cry. His cum splashed over his stomach. Hannibal came after him and collapsed on the bed as well, snuggling with him in laziness.

“You can take the shower first,” Hannibal said after they regained their breath. He combed Will’s hair with his fingers.

Will nuzzled against Hannibal’s hand. “Not showering with me?”

Hannibal closed his eyes with an audible breath. “I am afraid I would not be able to resist you. You need to get up early tomorrow.”

Will pouted and got up, not forgetting leaving a kiss to his husband.

He closed the bathroom door but did not lock it, in case Hannibal changed his mind.

The mirror caught his eyes. Tilting his head, he giggled at the love bites on his neck and collarbones. He placed his necklace on the counter carefully before stepping into the shower.

His mind wandered off once the water fell upon him. His beast stared at him between the water in a form it had never taken before—a magnificent stag clothed in raven feathers. Will stared back, not knowing what message it wanted to convey.

# Chapter 3

Drawing in a deep breath, Hannibal woke fully.

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was about the time to prepare breakfast, but with his love sleeping soundly in his arms, getting out of the bed had become an insurmountable task.

Hannibal sighed and shifted to get closer to Will, whose hair curved wildly, tempting him to thread his fingers through it.

Will gave a soft hum, nuzzling against Hannibal's palm before falling back into his dream. He did not seem to have nightmares last night. The shade below his eyes had faded away and a small smile tugged up his lips into an alluring curve.

Hannibal's chest ached sweetly for his conflicting desires to continue watching Will sleep and kiss him awake. And he did both. He planted his lips over Will's briefly and waited for any reaction.

Always a heavy sleeper, Will's lashes did not even flutter at it.

A childish smile bloomed on Hannibal's face. He stole a few kisses at once, waiting in silence again, and when he was about to take a nip on Will's lips, his phone vibrated and Will groaned, wiggling and kicking his shins to force him to sit up.

"Sh…" Hannibal patted Will's hair before grabbing his phone.

Jack Crawford.

Why was the head of BAU calling him in the early morning? If there was a case, he should be calling Will instead.

Will gave him a harder kick. He sighed and moved to the edge of the bed.

"Jack?"

"Good morning, Dr. Lecter. I'm sorry to bother you. I have to go to court today. I would like to ask if you could accompany Will to Minnesota for the investigation of the Shrike?"

How could he refuse.

"I would like to offer my help." Hannibal remained a neutral voice. "I will inform Will about it."

Will had already hidden his head beneath the quilt, and he peeped at Hannibal when he returned to his side. "What the fuck did he want?"

His mongoose was always grumpy in the morning.

Hannibal gave a fond smile to encourage Will to come out. “He needs to go to court. The adventure will be yours and mine today.”

“Why did he call you at the last minute? He definitely wants to force us to work together to make us get along.” Will huffed and threw himself at Hannibal’s bare chest.

“Don’t you want us to get along, Will?” Hannibal kissed Will’s frown.

Will looked up and glared at his smile. “We are not going to have another honeymoon trip, you know.”

“Of course, my dear,” Hannibal said. “Do you want to go back to Florence this Christmas?”

“Um, maybe?” Will rubbed his nape. “I also want a conventional Christmas. Tree, gifts, eggnog, ginger houses…”

“We could have them in Florence.”

“But we don’t have dogs there.” Will pouted and leaped out of the bed.

Cold immediately engulfed Hannibal, yet he stayed still, refraining from doing something indecent, like following Will into the bathroom or burying his face onto Will’s pillow for the lingering scent and warmth.

Renting the most filthy car must be Will’s attempt to retaliate for Hannibal’s not listening and buying first class tickets.

“Come on.” Will gestured at Hannibal from the car, lips twisting to hide his amusement. “What were you expecting? A Bentley?”

Hannibal stood for a few seconds more before deigning to get into the car, remaining expressionless the whole time to give Will no satisfaction in seeing his disgust.

They stopped before a construction site. Hannibal asked when Will unbuckled his seat belt: “What are we looking for?”

“At this stage, anything really. But mostly anything peculiar.” Not giving Hannibal the opportunity to open the car door for him, Will put on his glasses and got out of the car before Hannibal did.

Hannibal followed Will quickly, as always all his attention engrossed on his love. He merely glimpsed through the files while watching Will’s every movement. This was a rare chance for

him to observe how the FBI agent worked, after all.

He didn't find anything suspicious.

Will ruffled his hair in frustration. He asked the secretary: "Do you know anyone here has a daughter who's at eighteen or nineteen, has auburn hair and about this tall?" He gestured but got no useful answer.

"We should start checking the workers who have recently resigned," Will said after they finished boxing the papers. "He would try to cut himself off from the world. He needs time to hunt and eat." He shut the trunk lid and looked at Hannibal. "Stay behind me and leave the talking to me."

Exactly the opposite to what they usually did. Hannibal hummed.

A girl with brown hair and familiar height opened the door for them.

It was only the second house they had visited. Hannibal wondered if fate did favour Will and liked helping him to find any killer he sought, even though Will himself did not seem to be aware of it.

"Dad?" The girl's voice quivered slightly at Will's badge.

Garret Jacob Hobbs appeared, unfazed. He offered a polite smile, eyes cold as steel, in which a sick determination rose.

Will introduced themselves again before asking: "You worked at a construction site before?"

"Not anymore," the killer said, sizing them up till his gaze was caught by the gun half-covered by Will's jacket. "Why?"

"So you aren't working anymore?" Will lifted his chin at the girl. "How about the college fees? She looks old enough to go to a college, aren't you?"

The girl nodded, voice lost.

"Why are you here?" Garret Jacob Hobbs stepped forth and Hannibal stepped closer to Will as well.

Will's posture remained relaxed however.

"She looks like the missing girls," Will said. "Have you read the news, Mr. Hobbs? The Minnesota Shrike takes girls like her. Same age, same hair colour, same height and weight."

“Her eyes are different,” the killer responded. Too fast. “She’s safe.”

Eye colour was a minor detail. Hannibal smirked in his heart. All the eyes looked the same in the dark and blood.

Will shifted his weight. “Where were you this Wednesday night, Mr. Hobbs?”

Garret Jacob Hobbs’ face relaxed slightly. “Here. With my wife and daughter. Where else would I be?”

“We’ve found the body of Cassie Boyle. Do you know her?”

“It doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Really? It’s all over the news.” Will stared, blinkless. Each of his words pierced the killer sharply—“She was naked, impaled by antlers, butchered like a pig.”

“Poor girl.” Garret Jacob Hobbs shook his head, a tremor of anger hidden in his voice. “Whoever did this is a monster. She was someone’s daughter. She should be protected, loved.” He looked up at Will with narrowed eyes, his voice deepened. “You think I killed her? You think I would do something so monstrous?”

“Of course not.” Will gave a smile. “But better if you let us take a look at your house. For safety, you know.”

Will took a step. The killer confronted him with a cold smirk.

“Come back when you have a warrant.” He slammed the door at Will’s nose.

Rude.

Hannibal clenched his jaw.

“Let’s go.” Will nudged his elbow and he followed instinctively.

“Is she the one?” Hannibal asked to divert his attention.

Will glanced back at the house. Confusion lay in his voice. “Her eyes don’t match.”

“The Shrike might try to hide her to reduce the suspicion. He might not target the exact doppelgangers. Eye colour is a negligible detail.”

Will nodded half-heartedly. “I can’t break into his house without any concrete evidence. We need a warrant.”

The next morning Hannibal woke alone in Will's house. The dogs were already scratching the bedroom door, asking to be fed, but he reached for his phone first.

Will had decided to stay in Minnesota and promised he would keep in touch with him, but he had never answered Hannibal's calls or texted him last night. Concern had gnawed Hannibal's heart the whole night. Now, finally, a new message flashed on the screen. Hannibal breathed out. Though the timestamp of the message made him frown again.

03:37 W: What the heck you called me 20 times? I am fine, Hannibal. Only forgot to charge my phone. You worry too much. You're so annoying >:(

Hannibal shook his head. How could he not worry about his beloved mongoose?

He texted back: I have every reason to worry about you, for instance, you would never rest until someone begs you to. I doubt you would go to bed after texting me this message.

Hannibal stared at his phone for three minutes.

Will said: You woke me! You want me to sleep or not? >:(

Hannibal responded with a smile: I apologize, my love.

Will texted back: Hate you! >:(

With a found sigh, Hannibal pushed himself out of the bed to feed the demanding pack and his empty stomach.

He read the news after breakfast as usual. A blood-red heading hopped into this view— "The Death of Minnesota Shrike."

Another visit was needed.

The mixed scents of meat, sauces, and wine filled Hannibal's nose as soon as he followed Jack and Will into the quiet house, yet none of them could rival the tangy smell of blood from the kitchen, where a woman had died with her throat slit, abandoned and forgotten.

"No sign of forced entry?" Will stepped between the broken dishes, face veiled in the shadow as he turned his back at the windows, expressionless.

"Nothing," Jack said. "No footprint either. The door was wide opened when we arrived."

"He was in a hurry. No need to cover it up anymore." Will took off his glasses and crouched to study the cut on the woman's throat.

Hannibal looked at him with the same curiosity. He searched for Will's usual self, but it had already sunk into the depth.

Hannibal nostrils flare; he could smell the sourness from his own heart.

"There are only three sets of silverware. Not a guest of dinner." He pointed at the scattering utensils, attempting to draw Will's attention.

Will nodded, but his gaze fixated at the corpse. "Not a guest. Host. He was the host of their last supper." He stood. "It was not impulsive. It was planned. He killed her directly, silenced her, got her out of the way. She wasn't what he wanted." He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing, turning back to Jack in reluctance. "Where's the girl?"

"In the cabin."

As Jack led their way again, Hannibal placed a hand on Will's shoulder and squeezed slightly. It did not soothe Will however. Tension simmered in Will's muscles.

The overwhelming scent of old and fresh blood haunted the cabin. In the hellish sight of sprayed crimson, the girl lay peacefully on the workbench like a princess in her glass coffin. Her hands rested on her stomach, holding a bundle of daisy. A scarf wrapped around her neck. Not a drop of blood had stained her skin.

They stood at the table in silence.

The girl looked like the little doll his sister had used to play with. Mischa liked combing its hair, dressing it up, and cradling it tenderly in her arms. She loved it. The Shrike loved his daughter too, but it was a distinct, morbid kind of love. He wanted to consume her like a spider craving to eat her newborns. He would not leave her intact like this.

"There are wounds on her throat and abdomen. Sutured." Beverly untied the girl's scarf and lifted up her clothes.

"Neat stitches." Hannibal noted.

"He wanted to fix her as much as possible," Will said.

Jimmy raised his brows. "He killed her, hung her on the antlers, and then put her down and sewed her back?"

Will shook his head. "Whoever put her here is not the one who had killed her. It was not regretting or undoing his sins. He was simply sad. He was too late to save her. These were the only things he could do for her, to let her rest in peace."

"He wanted to save her?" Jack asked with a raised voice.

"Pitied her, at least."

"Or it could be like the last time when the Shrike put Elise Nichols back."

“The Shrike abducts the girls. He doesn’t kill them right away and he only targets them, not their families.” Will looked at the girl again. Sadness strained his voice. “Her father is the Shrike.”

Jack turned his face away, digesting Will’s statement. “Come upstairs.”

It was like venturing into the next ring of hell.

A forest of antlers protruding from the walls trapped them instantly, sharp branches stained with the smells of rotting blood and entrails. Garret Jacob Hobbs was pinned on the farest wall, antlers rupturing his ribs. His throat and stomach had been slit. Blood sprinkled over the space and guts piled beneath his dangling feet like fallen tinsels.

It was a sight a cat owner would see on their doormat every morning, but Hannibal did not own a cat.

He tilted his head, the first time of the day his attention fully drawn by something instead of his love.

Intriguing.

He could see his name written on it.

“You still believe he is the Shrike?” Jack eyed Will.

“You are denying the truth only because you don’t want to think that there’s another killer who is more dangerous than the Shrike lurking out there.”

Jack clenched his jaw. “Freddie Lounds said someone had sent her the picture and asked her to use ‘The Death of Minnesota Shrike’ as the heading.”

Hannibal shifted his gaze from the corpse to Will.

“He loathes what he did,” Will said. “He slit his throat, mounted him on the wall, and butchered him just how the Shrike had killed other girls. He even broke his ribs and ripped his heart out. To him, the Shirke is a heartless, ugly monster hiding behind love to kill those girls. He informed Freddie Lounds to expose this monster, to serve justice.”

Will’s lips twisted into a pitiless smile. “It’s like a fairy tale. The hunter cut open the wolf’s belly and freed the poor girl.”

Hannibal smiled as well. Only Jack wrinkled his nose in distaste.

“There are still seven bodies unaccounted for. Had to be parts he didn't eat. Bones. Hair.”

“Not necessarily.”

“All right. What if he wasn't eating alone? It’s a lot of work.”

“The Shrike hunted alone. So does this killer…” Will bit his lips, staring at Garret Jacob’s eyes, as if trying to capture the last image he had seen. “He’s killed before, experienced. He’s hard to catch.”

“Like the copycat.”

Will draw in a deep breath in a tremble. Hannibal stepped in before Will could no longer constrain his frustration.

“Indeed there are similarities between them—this killer sees the Shrike as a pig and mounted him on the antlers, exposing and humiliating him, and he also took his organs, but he is a vigilante, driven by anger and sense of justice, even impulsive.” Like a feral being which only followed its own instincts. Hannibal wondered who his admirer could be.

# Chapter 4

Garret Jacob Hobbs stared at Will between the bloodied branches. His eyes were dark, so his heart, crumbled beneath Will's foot.

"Love is equal. This is not," Will said. "This is possession. Selfishness."

The dead man had no words to defense himself.

Will lowered his gaze, placing his hand on the beast's belly which undulated like a restless ocean, vague contours of faces and hands rising and drowning in it.

Will raised his knife. He slayed open the beast's stomach. Blood spewed and swamped the wooden floor. The girls crawled out from the crack one by one, all looking back at the corpse of the monster in horror and disgust.

"See, they don't love you back."

A huff of hot breath was all response he got.

Will looked around. The stag nudged him with his soft nose, looking proud.

"Will."

The stag nuzzled Will again. His scent was somewhat familiar.

"Will."

Will blinked. The darkness dissolved and sunlight revealed the reality to him.

Hannibal was lying beside him, no longer naked and disheveled like last night. He stroked Will's cheek. The familiar scent of cologne and bacon and eggs radiated from his hand.

"Good morning, my love." Hannibal placed a kiss between Will's brows.

"Morning." Will buried his face onto the pillow. He wanted to submerge himself back into the tranquilizing darkness, but his husband was as tempting as it.

"It's time to get up, mongoose." Hannibal patted his hair. "Breakfast is ready."

Will grunted. "I'm not going to school today."

Hannibal chuckled above Will's ear. "Your students could skip classes, but you could not."

"It's not fair." Will rolled onto his back, eyeing Hannibal with his half-lidded eyes. "Write me a doctor's note."

Hannibal printed his smile on Will's cheek. "Get dressed and join me downstairs. Doctor's orders."

Will pursed his lips but did so anyway.

Hannibal placed a thermal bag in front of Will's plate when he sat down. "I would not be able to have lunch with you today, therefore I have prepared something for you."

"You don't have to do that," Will mumbled with a shy smile. "I could go grab a sandwich."

Hannibal gave him a grim look. "That is why I need to prepare food for you everyday."

"You just want to spoil me."

"Yes."

Will looked away, fidgeting his fork and stuffing a forkful of scrambled egg into his mouth.

"Did you sleep well, Will?" Hannibal asked in a poor attempt to sound casual.

Will sipped his coffee. "You want to hear the truth? Even if it is ugly and foul?"

"Always the truth." Hannibal took Will's hand to kiss his knuckle, reminding him of their vows to each other. "No lies or secrets between us, except surprises."

Will did hope he could tell Hannibal all his secrets, including Garret Jacob Hobbs' heart which was now lying in his cooler.

"I dreamt of the Shrike." He blew away the bittersweet mist obscuring his sight. "I was killing him."

"You were seeing him through his killer's eyes?"

Will nodded. "I cut open his belly. I let the girls out."

To his surprise, Hannibal gave him an admiring smile . "You saved them like Zeus saving his siblings from their father's belly."

"I didn't feel I was the hero."

"What did you feel then?"

Will licked his lips. "Powerful."

Hannibal gazed at him, eyes sparkling with love as usual, but they resonated with something deeper. Will stared back. His pack barked suddenly and stormed to the door, drawing him to check who had come.

Alana stepped out of her car.

Colour drained from Will's face.

“Damn! Get upstairs!” He dashed back and grabbed up Hannibal's mug and dish. “Quick, Alana is here!”

He shoved everything into Hannibal’s hands and pushed him upstairs, not hearing any protests. When he rushed back and nearly tripped himself to death, Alana was already greeting the dogs through the door. Will took a breath to calm his rising panic before he opened the door to let her in.

“Sorry, I was changing clothes.”

“During your breakfast,” Alana said, smiling.

“Yeah. I saw your car and figured I shouldn’t open the door when only wearing a pair of boxers.” Will gestured for her to take a seat with an anxious laugh.

“I grew up with brothers.”

“I still needed to cover up.” Will stopped at his chair and shifted his weight. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Yes, thank you.” Alana paused in hesitation and said nonetheless, “I thought you weren’t keen on cooking.”

“I wasn’t. I’m trying to maintain a healthy life as my husband insists. Coffee?”

Alana nodded and Will poured her a cup. He nearly spilled the coffee when she said: “You said you and your husband are living separately? I hope I can meet him one day.”

“He’s shy. Like me.” Will laughed at his own words. He said after he settled down, “We've never been in a room alone together. What drove you here in the early morning? Apparently not for ambushing me to see if my husband is here.”

A part of Alana’s nervousness relaxed as Will started the topic first. “I’m worried about you, Will. Jack just pushed you into the field again. I want to make sure you are ok. I tried to call you last night, but you didn’t answer.”

What she saw on him was likely a poor puppy which had been frightened and sobbing the whole night for his nightmares. Will did sob last night. No thanks to his husband.

Will flattened his lips. “I slept well, Alana.”

Alana wrapped her hands around her cup. “You are trying to be physically healthy. I want you to be mentally healthy as well.”

“I’m healthy enough.” Will huffed. “Did Jack send you here?”

“I sent myself here.” Alana shook her head. “You found the Shrike, but this is not the end. There’ll be the next case and the next case. Jack doesn’t know when he will break you.”

“There’s no need to worry about me. Looking at the cases and understanding the killers, that is what I’ve been doing. It has never affected me and it will never affect me.”

His clear annoyance drove Alana away soon. She left after asking him to reconsider if he should continue helping Jack.

Will waited till the sound of her car could no longer be heard.

“You can come down now, husband.”

Hannibal emerged with his silverware and his empty cup and dish, looking exaggeratedly dismal. “I felt like Alana was the one to whom you had truly married and I was having an affair with you .”

Will laughed. “Come here. Don’t be jealous.” He hugged and kissed his frigid husband. “Don’t you think it is fun? Secretly meeting each other as if we were star-crossed lovers and would be torn apart if anyone knew. Don’t deny it, you love drama.”

Hannibal sighed and looked at him deeply. “I want to show you to the whole world and keep you to myself only.”

“Me too.” Will smiled under Hannibal’s needing lips.

“Hey, Willie, who cooked you this?”

Will tapped his mouth before he raised his head. Beverly grinned at him with a cocked brow as she strode into his office.

Will sighed and placed down his wrinkled napkin. “Couldn’t I cook it?”

“No way. It smells so great. Can I have some?”

“No.” Will wrapped his arms around the Tupperware dish.“My husband cooked it for me.”

“Wait, what? You’re married?” Jaw dropped, Beverly glanced at his empty hand in high suspicion.

Will could only pull out his necklace to prove it with his ring. “Almost a year.”

“Wow, congrats!” Beverly took the seat opposite to Will, her face lit up as if she had found a jewel inside a human skull. “What kind of person is he? Is he a chef?”

Will wiggled under her keen gaze. “A doctor.”

Beverly gave him a lewd smile. “Is he hot?”

Will nearly choked. “What?”

“That’s a ‘yes’ then. Oh, Will, Will, you sly boy. We all thought that you were a boring people-hater, but you got yourself hooked up with a hot doctor!”

Will blushed and stabbed a piece of meat with his fork. “I had no interest in him at first.”

“How did he catch your heart? Wait, how did you first meet? Did he fall in love with you at the first glance? And who proposed to whom?”

Will covered his ears with his palms. He yelled, “Are you here to investigate my love life?”

Beverly yelled back, “Jack asked me you see if you know anything about gardening.”

Will firmly refused Beverly’s offer of driving him to the crime scene, knowing well that she was planning to inject him with truth serum and force him to spill everything about his husband, including the colour of Hannibal’s underwear.

When he arrived, Jack was standing before the police tape, clearly waiting for him.

“You promised unusual cases only.” Will approached slowly, kicking the rocks and leaves on the forest floor.

“Seven bodies, buried in a row and well-fertilized. Does that sound unusual enough?” Jack stepped aside, revealing the shallow graves and the unmistakable, decaying human bodies underneath sheets of dead leaves and fresh mushroom.

Will clenched his jaw to hide his teeth. He slipped past the tape to join the rest of his team, his gaze glued to the corpses.

“Patient way to dispose of a body,” Jimmy said.

“It is not about getting rid of the bodies.” Will knelt by one of the corpses. “He’s using them as fertilizer for his crops.” He glanced through the body and studied its decomposed hand protruding heavenwards. “No restraints? They weren't bound?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Just dirt.”

Will took off his glasses.

The killer did not bind them because there was no need to do so. They could not leave. They did not know they were dying. No need to know. He had no intention to induce physical or mental pain. It was not about pain or death. It was transformation. Their bodies decayed, but

their lives were reshaped, taking another form which was much more beautiful—the dead man grabbed his wrist.

Will gasped. He flung off the rotten hand and staggered backwards till his back hit a tree, only realizing it was not a hallucination when the others rushed to the revived man.

“Fuck.” He laughed.

He could not bear to see or hear mushrooms for days afterwards.

The tantalizing scent of food had filled Hannibal’s entire house and drew Will in, neglecting to take off his jacket and heading straight to the kitchen.

“What are you making?” Will hugged his husband from behind and peeked over his shoulder. Creamy lava bubbled in the pot. A few slices of mushrooms floated to the surface as Hannibal stirred.

“What the hell Hannibal?” Will withdrew quickly, disbelieved.

Hannibal turned and regarded Will with an innocent look which he loved to put on whenever he was up to something, even though Will could always catch the mischief in Hannibal’s eyes, but right now what they harboured was genuine confusion.

Will shook his head, abashed. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Will.” Hannibal turned off the stove and held Will by his waist. He kissed Will softly, but equally determined that he would lock Will in his arms forever unless Will gave him a proper answer.

Will sighed. “Murders again. We’ve found bodies in a wood. They were buried alive and used as fertilizer to culture mushrooms. We thought they were all dead. They should have been dead. But one of them wasn’t and...grabbed my hand like he wanted to drag me into hell with him. Ugh, I think I need to wash my hands again.” He pushed Hannibal away, hurried to the sink, and scrubbed his hands hard.

“Do you need me to prepare another soup without mushrooms?” Hannibal asked with amusement which he did not brother to cover.

Will pouted. He went back and peeked at the soup again, half-expecting to see a swollen, decayed hand, but his stomach growled at the tantalizing smell. “I think I haven’t been conditioned to fear mushroom soup.”

Hannibal chuckled and poured Will a glass of wine. “Tell me about the case. I believe you were not emphasizing when you said the bodies were used to culture fungi.”

Will nodded. “He buried them in a row with high-nutrient compost. The graves were very shallow. Only thin layers of earth hid them from the air. He left their hands exposed. The bodies were discovered because of that.”

“Why did he leave the arms exposed? To hold their hands? Feel the life leaving their bodies?”

“He tried to keep them alive, feeding them fluids intravenously.” Will heaved his rear and sat at the edge of the island. “If he only wants mushrooms, he wouldn’t waste such effort to keep them alive.”

Hannibal stepped between his legs, kissing his frown away. “The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain. An intricate web of connections.”

Will tilted his head. “He admires their ability to connect the way human minds can't.”

Hannibal cupped Will’s cheeks with immense tenderness. “Yours can.”

Will laughed, blushing. “Not physically.” He shook his head. “Not with reciprocity.”

“Perhaps it is what your Farmer is looking for? Some sort of connection. All of us, including serial killers, crave understanding.” Hannibal’s gaze hopped onto Will’s lips, hooking Will to lean forth for a sweet kiss.

As they set the table together, Hannibal brought up casually, “Jack will join me for dinner tomorrow night.”

“You are going to talk about me.” Will looked up, deadpan.

“Likely.” Hannibal smiled at his plate before looking at Will, challenging. “Would you like to join us?”

“Hell, no.” Will rolled his eyes.

Hannibal said after a moment, “Alana was right.”

“What?”

“About her words this morning.” Hannibal caught Will’s hand gently as if catching a little bird. “Jack promised he would only bother you for the Ripper’s case, then he came to you for the Shrike, and now for the Farmer.”

“I wanted to go back into the field.”

Hannibal sighed. “A sponge could squeeze out the water inside it easily, but not the dye. The darkness in those killers’ minds would stain you and could never be washed away.”

“Seriously?” Will put his hands on his hips. “First I am a teacup, then I am a mongoose, and now I am a sponge? What’s next? A barbie doll for Jack to play with?” He snorted and dodged away when Hannibal tried to peck his pursed lips.

Will had a huge faith that he would end up developing mysophobia and chop his arms off if the case did not end soon. He had almost scrubbed his skin off and yet he still smelled disgusting. Even Hannibal wrinkled his nose when Will stepped through the door, only too polite to cover his nose and kick Will out.

“Will…” Face contorted, Hannibal began slowly as if it could reduce the air flowing into his lungs. “You smell like...fertilizer.”

“Yes, I smell like shit.” Will grimaced. “‘Cause I’ve saved a woman from a car trunk filled with shit.”

“You are a hero, Will.” Hannibal approached Will with uncertainty. He raised his hands and tried to help Will take off his jacket, but apparently unable to step any closer. Will would say he was already brave enough, not running away from him within a second.

Hannibal cleaned his throat to cover his embarrassment. “Did you find the killer?”

“Only his car. But we know who he is. Should be able to find him soon. I’m going to take a shower quick. Talk to you later.” Will scurried upstairs.

Hannibal brought him his clothes after the scent of the shower gel filled the air. He handed Will a tube of hand lotion when Will came out of the bathroom, saying it was for preventing skin irritation. It was an outright lie.

“You won’t smell it if you stop sniffing at me.” He laughed as Hannibal caged him with his arms and nosed him all over.

“My nose begs to differ.”

“Are we going to sleep in different rooms tonight?”

“Of course not.” Hannibal tightened his arms so hard he almost crushed Will’s ribs.

Will smirked. “‘From this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, in health, and in horrible smell?’”

Hannibal nuzzled their cheeks together. “I do.”

“You are impossible.” Will nipped Hannibal’s lips.

“How did you find out who he is?” Hannibal asked when finally satisfied with his inspection. “He seeks connections. Are the victims all connected in some way?”

“They’re all diabetics. The IV bags attached to them contained dextrose. He's a pharmacist. He changes their doses, induces a coma, and bam, fertilizer.”

“It’s easier than I expected.”

“Yeah. Not all the killers are like the Ripper.” Will flopped onto the bed and stretched with a moan.

Hannibal lay down with Will, dragging an arm over his stomach out of habit.

Will smiled at the ceiling. “How was your dinner with Jack last night?”

Hannibal’s hand sneaked beneath the T-shirt and stroked Will’s belly. “It went well. I suggested inviting his wife to dine with us next time, and he said he wanted to meet my partner as well.”

Will rolled onto his side to face Hannibal. “What did you say then?”

“‘I am afraid that he is a very shy creature.’”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.” Hannibal smirked and Will groaned.

“Imagine Jack’s face when he finds out that ‘shy creature’ is me.”

“I believe it would not be a problem. Some couples work together smoothly. Besides, I am not officially working for the FBI. There is no conflict of interest.”

“That sounds like cheating.” Will shifted slightly. “Would you agree to be my shrink if we didn’t know each other and you were only interested in my mind?”

“Likely,” Hannibal said, pressing their forehead together. “It would be a rare chance to study a beautiful mind like yours. But soon I would find that I was not only attracted by your empathy.”

Will shove Hannibal’s chest. “All you know is sweet talk.”

“I can also do dirty talk if you want.” Hannibal ran his hand over Will’s bottom.

“Gosh, you are a count!”

“Indeed I am.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Then you should be a gentleman. Get your hands off me.”

Hannibal squeezed Will’s butt with a smirk. “Am I not gentle to you?”

“You are rude.” Will pushed his husband away and turned to face the windows.

Hannibal hugged him like a giant koala again, chuckles vibrating against his back. A soft kiss alighted on his nape. “Will.”

“What?”

“There is an opera—”

“Nope.”

Hannibal sighed. “Saying no upon hearing any social interaction has become a reflex for you.”

Will rolled himself back. “Ok. Let’s analyze it. What are the cons of me going to the opera? Faking smiling to those pretentious airheads and listening to their empty, convoluted, and annoying inanities the whole night. And what are the pros of me not going? I can stay with my dogs, eat a whole pizza for dinner, and watch The Blue Planet till I fall asleep on my couch.”

“Without me.” Hannibal reminded him.

“I can do these with you if you don’t go to the opera.” Will crossed his arms over his chest.

“I will make you a berry trifle if you say yes.”

Oh, bribing him with food now? “You will make me anything if I ask you.”

“Will…” Hannibal put on his innocent face. “Last time you agreed to accompany me to an opera you did not keep your promise, as you changed your mind the last minute and seduced me to our bed.”

Will laughed. “Saying like you didn’t enjoy that night.”

“I promise that it will be the last opera I will ask you to attend this year.”

“And there will be musicals, art exhibitions, balls, dinners, etc etc.” Will pursed his lips. “You said I am priceless art, yet you are going to waste your time and money on other things.”

“You are married to me, yet you love your dogs more than me.”

Will widened his eyes. “Are you comparing yourself with my dogs?”

“I am.”

They both beamed.

Hannibal cupped Will’s cheek. “Please consider it.”

“You won’t take ‘no’ as an answer,” Will grumbled with a sigh. What he got was a hum and a kiss.

“Good night, love.”

Before Will got near his house, the frantic dog barks pierced through the car windows and raised the hair on his back. He pulled over and hopped out of his car. A silhouette lurked on his porch, cooing the provoked pack while attempting to pick the lock.

Loud bang ceased all the notions.

Blood erupted from Eldon Stammets’ shoulder as the shock sent him onto the ground.

Will tightened his grip on his gun. He hated cleaning up human fluids.

“What were you planning to do with my dogs?” He advanced on the man and kicked away the fallen gun, his beast growling behind his ears, hooves scratching the floor for a lunge. “What do you want, huh? Burying them alive to make more mushrooms?

“You should be able to understand me.” Stammets quivered, raising his unwounded hand as if it was able to stop the waiting bullets. “The article said you understood me.”

“I don’t.” Damn Freddie Lounds. He had let her be the first one to report the death of the Shrike, and this was what she wanted to repay him?

“You should have—”

“You better keep your mouth shut.” Will pressed his gun against the man’s forehead. “You are not only a serial killer. You are worse. I kick every animal abuser I’ve met to hell.”

Will’s finger trembled on the trigger. It lacked intimacy. Too quick, too painless. And they would find out that Stammets had come to him. Killing him now would get him into a lot of troubles.

“You got lucky today.”

Will ground his teeth and called Jack.

He texted Hannibal about the killer after all the annoyance finally left him alone. Hannibal rushed into his house an hour later, coat askew and hair tousled.

“Will, are you alright? Did he harm you?” Hannibal whirled Will around from his workbench, grabbing his shoulders hard while searching for any injury.

Will put down the feather and thread he was using for a new fishing lure. “I’m fine. Calm down.”

Hannibal checked every part of Will. Will had to grab his hands before he decided to strip him bare.

“I am fine. Hannibal.”

“He is a serial killer.”

“Yeah, that’s why I shot him once I saw him picking my lock to get to my dogs.” Will clenched his jaw. “What scum he is. He wanted to bury the dogs alive so I could connect with them. Fucking lunatic. Read Freddie Lounds’ rubbish and thought I could understand him. Who knows what she would bring me next. The Ripper will probably knock on my door next morning.” That was one of his wildest dreams though.

Hannibal shook his head and knelt on one knee, holding Will’s hand tight. “I am glad that you are unscathed.”

Will tugged the strand of hair fallen on Hannibal’s forehead back. He could not help but smile. “It is a rare chance to see you panic.”

Hannibal kissed Will’s knuckles. “Losing you is my greatest fear.”

Will’s heart ached for it. What had he done to deserve a man like Hannibal?

# Chapter 5

Hannibal threw the sausages at the hungry mouths around him, secretly leaving a large piece for Winston who sat patiently by his feet.

Jack had dragged Will out of the state again. Will had been indulging him by saying yes every time, even after he had had a serial killer at his door. Hannibal could only sigh at Will's stubbornness.

He took off his coat while checking the living room. It was not difficult to spot the scattered dog toys on the floor and the opened books on the couch and coffee table. With a small smile he gathered up the toys and slipped bookmarks between the pages before piling the books into a neat column.

Will's kitchen was relatively untouched as expected. Hannibal went straight to the cupboard which displayed a neon-yellow sticky note yelling "Leave my pantry alone". Ignoring the warning, he opened the door and pawed at all the "food". Two packs of chocolate and one bag of spicy chips had disappeared within two days.

Hannibal could never understand why Will would want to put something so harmful into his mouth.

He closed the cupboard with a thud and ascended to their bedroom, where a chaos of blankets and laundry greeted him on their bed.

Messy mongoose.

Hannibal shot a disapproving look at the scene before sorting the clothes and putting them into the closet. A bright red note of "Take your hands off my underwear, you dirty old man" went into his way when he was to place Will's boxers back. He pulled open the drawer with a smirk. Will must learn how to keep his house in order if he did not want him to "encroach on his privacy".

"Have you done something bad when you were a child and your mother forgave you?" Will murmured.

Hannibal's eyelids forgot to blink for a second.

Will had seemed preoccupied since he had stepped into Hannibal's house. Hannibal asked about his silence. He said it was not about the case and wanted to leave it after dinner.

Hannibal doubted that but agreed. The question was not what he had anticipated.

Will rose his head from Hannibal's shoulder, looking at him with widened eyes which he never had the strength to resist.

He gave Will a kiss and turned his face to the fireplace. The flame brought him back to the old castle.

"Mischa and I liked feeding the swans in our garden everyday. Sometimes our parents would join us and take us into a little wooden boat.

"One afternoon Mischa suggested we take the boat on our own. We would not go too far, only near the shore. She begged me. I agreed. I helped her into the boat and paddled only two or three meters away. Something must have gotten her attention when I was not looking. She bent over the edge and fell. She screamed at me. I jumped into the water without a thought. I was still learning to swim at that time. It took all my strength to bring Mischa back to the shore.

"We were both exhausted, sodden. There was no way to hide it from the adults. It was my fault not looking after my sister carefully. I almost had her drown. But my mother hugged me, saying I was brave for saving my sister. I was a good brother."

Will covered his hand. Hannibal blinked away the glint in his eyes.

"Was Mischa afraid to go to the lake after that?" Will asked softly.

"She wasn't." Hannibal smiled. "She knew I was always there with her. She did cling to me more often though, grabbing my hand or sleeve wherever we went." He sipped his wine to swallow the bitterness.

Will gulped down a mouthful of wine.

"A family was killed at their dining table." He breathed heavily. "Parents and two of their children—they had a son who went missing a year ago. No sign of forced entry. All the victims had defensive wounds except for the mother. She was the last to be shot. She looked at her killer. Accepting. Forgiving. Just like a mother always does."

"It's what's bothering you." Hannibal stroked Will's cheek to lure him to relax. "The mother's forgiveness."

"I don't understand it… I don't understand a mother's love." Will stared at his knees. "At least mine doesn't have that kind of love for me." He clenched his hands as if wanting to catch his absent mother.

"A missing son returned and killed his family." Hannibal tried to distract Will, not letting him drown in his past. "Were the parents abusive?"

"Not physically, at least. They tried to live like they were wealthy and happy. Tried." Will bit his lips. "There were three pairs of unknown shoe prints. He brought his own family to see him destroying his former one. It's sick. Even if your family treated you so badly, you

wouldn't, you wouldn't kill them. I...I just can't understand. I feel distant. 'Family' is always a strange term to me." Will sought his alcohol again.

Hannibal sighed. "Are we not family?"

It almost startled Will into spilling his wine. "I...I didn't mean that, Hannibal. I was, I…"

Hannibal shushed and caressed Will's cheek.

Will lowered his shoulders with a nervous smile. "We are a couple, but, to me, family means parents and children."

Chewing the words, Hannibal tilted his head to capture Will's skittish gaze. His next question was phrased as casually as if asking Will if he cared for another glass of wine: "Do you want to have children, Will?"

Will opened his mouth, gawking at him for a moment too long that it worried him, driving him to check the warmth of Will's forehead.

Will pushed his hand away. "We, we've never talked about it… Are you asking seriously?"

"I am simply asking." However, if Will said yes, he would consider adopting a child or two, and he would likely agree.

Will eyed his smile. "You are planning to get a child as my birthday gift or something."

Hannibal sighed at Will's distrust. "I am not. I promise."

Will looked away. "I… I can't have children. Can't let my wicked genes pass on."

"But do you want to adopt one?"

"I don't know. It's a huge responsibility." Will turned back to him. "And you?"

Hannibal shook his head slightly. "I was Mischa's brother and father. I would constantly fear the same fate would repeat itself if I became a father again. I am afraid I could not survive the loss of another child." He showed a smile to warm the air. "Do tell me if you change your mind."

"You too." Will leaned his head back onto Hannibal's shoulder, lacing their fingers together. "Did saving Mischa make you want to be a doctor to save other people?"

It was not about saving people. Hannibal tugged his lips. "It could be the first spark to push me to enter the medical field."

Will hummed. "And led us together."

"You could say so." Hannibal rubbed his cheek against Will's curls.

"If I decided to be a boat mechanic or a musician, you wouldn't have met me."

“I could hire you to fix my boat or I could attend your concert.”

“What if I was a dog trainer?” Will straightened himself with a wide smile like a child finding a gift in his sock. “You had no excuse to meet me then.”

Hannibal nipped Will’s lips. “You don’t want to meet me that much?”

Will giggled. “It’s unbelievable to think that it needed everything in the right place to lead us together. I mean, what is the chance of it?”

“It is not a chance.” Hannibal rested his forehead against Will’s. “You could predict the outcome of a set of dice if you did all the calculations. Everything was determined in the beginning of the universe. You and I are one of the inevitability.”

“You are too sweet.” Will shoved his chest.

“Do you want me to be spicy? Like the potato chips you ate?” Hannibal teased and Will’s smile dropped.

“Did you put your nose into my pantry again?” Will shifted away from Hannibal, crossing his arms and glaring at Hannibal like it could burn him.

Hannibal smirked at his bristled mongoose. “Technically it is not a pantry. Pantry is for food only.”

“Damn you. I am going to arrest you.” Will pinned Hannibal against the back of the couch and straddled his laps. “Raise your hands over your head, you burglar.”

Hannibal raised them to Will’s face instead, bringing him to his upturned lips. “I am willing to surrender, officer. Arrest me, please.”

There was no sign of Will in his classroom or office. Hannibal stayed at the locked door in case Will had only gone to the restroom. He waited for five minutes. Not a soul passed here. With a sigh he adjusted his visitor card and headed to the morgue.

Despite the potent chemicals and rotting death, Will’s scent stood out and guided Hannibal to him.

“Oh, hi, Dr. Lecter.” Beverly greeted him across from the autopsy tables, signalling Will who was facing away from him.

Will turned with quirked brows. Hannibal softened his gaze before offering a polite smile to the team, sizing up the bodies of a man and a woman between them. “I heard that you had

caught the Mother of the Lost Boys less than a week ago. A new killer has appeared already?"

"There are newborn monsters everyday." Will returned his words to him, handing over the case file.

Hannibal took the chance to move closer to his love, letting Will's scent fill his nose.

"We've found a couple in a motel room," Will said. "Naked. Kneeling in front of the bed. Praying. Hooks and fishing lines were used to support their 'angel wings.'"

Brian detached a hook from the man's skin. "It could be the Fisherman."

"The Fisherman?" Hannibal straightened himself.

"You don't know him, Doc? He's the second famous killer here." Jimmy curved his fingers and gestured at his jaw. "He likes sewing his victims' legs together and hooking their upper lips and jaw to hang them up like fish."

"I have heard of him." Vigilante, impulsive, wild, but also sophisticated and sadistic. He put on shows like the Ripper did, butchering his prey, humiliating them, exposing their ugliness. "Yet, making angles is quite different from gutting fish."

"It's not him." Will nodded. "This killer thinks he's elevating them, making them better beings. He wants to transform them, to purify them. This is not the Fisherman's style. The Fisherman is a punisher. He has no mercy. No intention to make them pure." He showed Hannibal a photo taken at a different angle. "This killer slept in the bed last night."

Hannibal studied it, amused. "Among his creations. For being worshipped?"

Will shook his head. "They weren't praying to him. For him. He is afraid."

"Angels are guardians, protectors." Hannibal agreed. "What kind of dreadful things in this mortal world the angels could protect him from?"

Will's eyes sparkled. "Mortality." He looked up with a smile, excited. "He's dying." He licked his lips. "What's in his vomit?"

Beverly took up the report. "Dexamethasone... Keppra… Gamma four radiation."

"Steroids for inflammation. Anticonvulsants for seizures. Radiation from chemotherapy," Brian explained quickly. "Our guy has a brain tumor."

Will put down the photos. He stared at the corpses' flaked flesh, but his mind was not projected on them. "He's afraid of dying in his sleep," he whispered. "So he made these angels to watch over him."

For a while they looked at the corpses like angels would do.

Hannibal said, “You said he wants to make them better beings. Does he see them bad, or even sinful?”

“Could be. We should check their criminal records.” Will took a step back while taking off his glasses, turning to Hannibal. “You have some medical textbooks in your office, right?”

“Yes.” Hannibal beamed widely, ignoring the quirked brows of the team. “We can go there after lunch. I believe you have not eaten yet.”

Will hummed and peeled off his gloves. “You drove all the way here just to remind me to eat lunch.”

Hannibal followed Will to the bin only a few steps away. “And to invite you to have lunch with me.”

To hasten Will he slid an arm around Will’s waist out of habit, ready to go, but Beverly shrieked at him—“Wow, keep your hands off, Doctor.” She stormed to him with hands raised, trying to deter him away with her bloodied gloves. “Will seems to like you a lot, but, hands off, he’s married already.”

Hannibal looked at Will who was blushing and struggling to dislodge his arm. It was impossible for them to hide the truth anymore. Hannibal’s smile stretched into a smirk as he pretended to be innocent. “I am fully aware of it, but I don’t see a problem.”

Beverly stared at him in disbelief. “He has a husband.”

“Yes. His husband is me.”

Scalpels and forceps clattered in the autopsy table. Beverly, Brian, and Jimmy gaped at them. Quite frankly, seeing this was more satisfying than peeling a pig’s skin alive.

“Will!” Beverly drew a breath. “Dr. Lecter is your hot doctor?”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

Will made a painful noise, his face as red as if on fire. “He, he is a doctor, and, yeah, hot.”

“Well, I don’t doubt that. But he is certainly better than any hot doctors in the world.”

“Wait, I don’t, I don’t get it.” Jimmy raised his hand. “You two just met each other and got married already?”

“Will and I met two years ago,” Hannibal said, pecking Will’s cheek. “We married each other last Christmas.”

Will pursed his lips and immediately tensed and tried to hide behind Hannibal as Jack’s voice appeared all in the sudden.

“What are you fussing about?”

“Oh, Jack, do you know that—”

“Bev!”

“—Will and Hannibal are married to each other?”

Will’s face turned pale. Hannibal met Jack’s gaze, unfazed instead.

Jack looked at them for a few seconds then gave out a laugh. “I was still wondering why you refused the job at first, Dr. Lecter. I see.” He waved his hands and said before leaving, “I don’t care whom you are dating with or married to, as long as it won’t affect your work.”

“And we should also go now. We have a date to attend.” Hannibal nodded at the team as a goodbye and took Will out of the morgue.

It was until they left the elevator Will came back from his shock. “What, I can’t believe… What just happened? He just walked away?”

Hannibal chuckled. “I told you it would not be a problem to Jack that we are a couple. Besides, what would happen even if he disapproved? He has no power to part us. No one has.” He took Will’s hand and locked their fingers together. “Though I was surprised as well, that you see me as a ‘hot doctor’. I did not know you hold me in such high regard.”

Will bristled again. “Bev said that, not me. Stop teasing me!”

His mongoose was too adorable, Hannibal could not hide his smirk. Will flung away his hand and refused to talk to him during their lunch.

“Maybe I’m wrong.” Will closed the book. “ How do you profile someone who has an anomaly in their head changing the way they think?”

“A tumor can definitely affect brain function, even causing vivid hallucinations. However, what appears to be driving your Angel Maker to create heaven on Earth is a simple issue of mortality.” Hannibal descended from the balcony, hurrying to his love’s side.

“Can’t beat God, become him.” Will scoffed.

“You said he was afraid.”

“He feels abandoned.” Will placed down the book and sat at the edge of the desk. “You’ve seen it a lot, right? Back in the day when you were a surgeon.”

Hannibal nodded in indifference. “All of our fears are associated with our inevitable death. Fear of the dark, of pain, of isolation… Death lurks behind. It is what drives us to write, to

paint, to build, to create, for us to live beyond our physical bodies."

"The fear of death also drives him to bring death to other people."

Hannibal chucked at Will's remark. "If he were a classic paranoid schizophrenic, you might be able to influence him to become visible."

"Like scare him out into the daylight?" Will tilted his head, too adorable that it made Hannibal's heart ache.

Hannibal succumbed to the lure and walked to Will. "Might even get him to hurt himself if he hasn't already."

Will fluttered his lashes. "If he were self-destructive, he...he wouldn't be so careful."

"Unless he's being careful about his self-destruction. Making angels to pray over him when he sleeps." Hannibal stepped between Will's thighs, thumb tracing Will's bottom lip. "Who prays over us when we sleep?"

Will, his mischievous, vicious Will, laughed at his longing and pushed him away. "Don't you think about watching me sleep the whole night like a creepy vampire."

He did do that occasionally, sketching Will's bare body lit by the dim moonlight. He would never tell Will though.

The next night Will hurtled into Hannibal's kitchen and gave a brief peck on his cheek, smelling of blood and death again.

"It's been a crazy day." Will sighed, rolling up his sleeves and stuffing his watch into his pants pocket. "Let me help you? I am starving."

"You did not have lunch today." Hannibal darted Will a reproachful look while getting a chopping board and a knife for him.

"As I said, a crazy day." Will washed and dried his hands quickly.

"I smell death on you." Hannibal walked behind Will to help him tie his apron. He seized the chance to have a better sniff and left a kiss on Will's nape. "Did the Angel Maker kill again?"

"We found a security guard hung in an alley with a pair of angel wings." Will placed a tomato on the board. "Chop it?"

"Yes, please. We are having tomato soup tonight. Do you want to have a glass of wine?"

“Yeah.”

Hannibal pressed his lips on Will’s ear before pouring him a glass.

Will sipped the wine. “And there was a pair of severed testicles on the ground. He castrated himself.”

Self-harming already? “Angels are asexual. Is he turning himself into an angel?”

“He’s accepted his death or he’s bargaining.” Will licked his lips.

Hannibal stayed still, but his gaze glued on Will’s lips helplessly. The most painful thing was that Will seemed too busy with the vegetables and the case that he was totally unaware of his struggling.

“The guard was not a guard; he had a criminal record, and the couple in the hotel room were wanted for murder.”

“Vigilante.” Hannibal celebrated. “How does he know they are sinners?”

Will shook his head. “He doesn’t have to know. He only has to believe what he sees. He can tell if you are naughty just by looking at you”

“You can do it as well.” Hannibal leaned to steal a kiss. “Seeing into the souls of man.”

“Well, I don’t have a tumor.” Will laughed. “And unlike him I am not about to die yet.”

Will’s intuition never went wrong.

The obituary of the Angel Maker appeared on Tattle Crime the next day. Something smelled wrong however.

“He cut his back, tied both of his hands, and hung himself in the rafters on his own?” Hannibal looked up from his tablet, gaining a half-hearted hum from Will who was sitting at the workbench by the window with his back at him.

“I questioned that too.” Will cut the thread on his new fishing lure. “He probably got someone’s help. Someone who knows what he wanted to achieve.”

“Someone who pities him?”

“Not pity. He likes the Angel Maker’s design so he helped him. It is not something he normally would do.”

Hannibal covered his tablet. “The art of the Angel Maker gained him his respect.”

“Another vigilante.” Will raised the bait to inspect it under the late afternoon light, stroking the glittering feather. “He admires the Angel Maker making angels out of demons, but to him, the Angel Maker was no different from the demons he killed. So he helped him and,

therefore, helped rid the world of this monster." Will put down the hook and stretched with a yawn.

Hannibal rose from his chair and went to massage Will's shoulder. "Did you sleep last night?"

Will had insisted on coming back here after their dinner last night, silently asking for some private time. Hannibal let Will go even though he knew he would not be able to sleep well in the empty bed. It seemed that they could only have a good night's sleep when they rested together.

Will groaned at the squeeze on his sore muscles. "I checked my fishing gear and tidied up the shed."

Hannibal sighed. "You also plan to fish this weekend?" Leaving him alone the whole day again?

"Want to enjoy it as much as possible before the weather gets too cold." Will turned around and looked at Hannibal with a wide smile, blinking his eyes. "We haven't had a picnic for a long time. Join me this time? I will go to the opera in exchange."

Hannibal would say yes to whatever Will asked, but of course he would not refuse the chance to get Will to the opera. "What do you want to eat, my love?"

# Chapter 6

Will hid his eyes with his glasses as soon as he recognized the building looming over them. He ground his teeth at the sign displaying “Criminal Insane”.

The place was gloom, echoing silent screams and cries. Will would cover his ears and scream as well if it would not alert the guards and get him locked up. Even the doctor inside looked at him with unconcealed, sick interest.

That was why he hated shrinks. They were dangerous, always wanted to pry open his skull but had no guts to face what they would find. Quite ironic that he had married one of them. Well, Hannibal was way different from his notorious colleagues.

Will wondered if Hannibal knew Chilton when the doctor said his empathy had made him famous in their circles.

The invitation to a “special visit” sounded exactly like an invitation to hell. Will refused it without a thought. He was here for the Ripper—at least it was what Jack had told him.

“The reason you failed and kept failing to catch the Chesapeake Ripper is I already had him,” Chilton said with a smug smile.

What awaited them was a nurse impaled with numerous poles like a voodoo doll, similar to the corpse Will had seen on an autopsy table two years ago. The Wound Man.

“Here.” Hannibal handed Will a glass of wine and sat beside him on the chaise lounge.

Will had never sat in the armchairs in Hannibal’s office. They would be too far away from each other if they sat there, and it would feel like they were having a session. He had had enough of psychiatrists today.

Will whirled his glass and only took a sniff. “Are you encouraging me to get drunk in the middle of the day?”

“You look like you need the alcohol to relax a bit.” Hannibal rubbed Will’s tensed shoulders. “You have visited the Chesapeake Ripper, haven’t you?”

“Abel Gideon.” Will squeezed the name through his teeth.

“He was arrested two years ago around the time when the Ripper suddenly disappeared.”

“He was arrested because he killed his wife and her parents. It was...a mess. Impulsive. Immature.” Will tightened his grip and ordered his hand to relax quickly before he would break the glass. “We’ve interviewed him. When we talked about tests like the Rorschach one, he said it would be better to put a blood pressure cuff on his genitals.”

Hannibal scowled. “It is not something the Ripper would say.”

Will nodded in displeasure. “The body told me more. Yes, the wound patterns are as same as the Ripper’s last victim, but it is a blatant replica, devoid of all of the Ripper's usual disdain.”

He conjured the nurse to the center of the room. He glanced at her, not quite willing to have another look at this stolen work.

“Too little blood—the poles pierced her body after her heart stopped. Organs were taken after death as well. There was no intention to torture her as long as possible. It is just like rushing a boring labour. It is not his work. He traced the Ripper’s work. He is a damn plagiarist and no one can see it.” He gulped a mouthful of wine to douse his rising urge to go back to the asylum to skin the pig alive.

“You are more upset with the Ripper being plagiarized than an innocent person being killed.” Hannibal shifted closer to him.

Will twisted his lips, prepared to be lectured, but Hannibal said, “The Ripper must be more provoked than you are. Do you think he will reappear soon to call out this imposter?”

Will laughed, eyes darkened and sharp. “He will make sure everybody knows it’s him.”

“I told you it was a bad idea to get Freddie Lounds to piss him off.” Will trod to the observatory with Jack, using all his strength not to gloat.

Expecting the Ripper to lose his temper and throw a tantrum? He would throw a big, bloody party instead.

“We are not sure if it is him yet.” Jack clenched his jaw.

“You think that it would be another copycat?” Will huffed.

They entered the observatory. Will’s smirk froze.

In the center of the room lay a bed of flowers and feathers and a woman pierced by metal poles. Her arm outstretched to the sunlight falling from the dome. Her face had no skin left. Blood-stained nails and screws grew out from her skull to form a distorted crown, enchanting Will like a witch’s spindle. He barely stopped himself before he stepped onto a white feather. He swallowed hard.

“It’s him.” He turned his head at Jack’s direction, not taking off his eyes from the corpse. “He’s done hiding now.”

“So this is his ninth victim?” Jack glared at the body. “Two years after his last kill. Did he lose his inspiration or did he break his pattern?”

He did break his pattern. He disguised himself as a copycat in the Shrike case. He might have been killing under other names before.

Will pressed his lips together. “I would say something unexpected and influential had happened to him. This time feels different somehow.” He turned to the team. “Any missing organs?”

“Tongue,” Jimmy said, carefully opened the corpse’s mouth to show him the clear cut on the root. “And based on the sutures on her forehead, I bet he also took her brain out.”

“Along with the skin on her face.”

“Yes, everyone can see it, Brian.”

Will took off his glasses and bent over to study the muscles on the woman’s face. “That’s not skin to him. A mask rather. He took it off to reveal how hideous she actually was, debunking her.”

“What about the nails on her head?” Beverly asked. “To make himself a Frankenstein monster or to do a twisted lobotomy?”

Will shook his head. “He turned her into a crowned crane.” His murmur drew all of their gazes to him. He pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “He sees her as Oenoe, the mortal who boasted herself more beautiful than Hera and got punished by the goddess, cursed into a crane.”

“So he plays god now?”

“Not really.” Will followed the sun rays streaming in and looked up to the opening of the dome. He wondered if the Ripper had also looked up to seek the night sky after placing the body here. “He is a worshipper. He did it for his wrathful god or goddess. It is an offering.”

“To whom?” Jack demanded. “Is that the same person who made him stop killing?”

“Could be.”

“Also a killer?”

Will inhaled sharply. “They made him stop, Jack, directly or indirectly. Either way, they made the Ripper believe they don’t want him to kill.”

“They also made him kill now.”

“Abel Gideon got their attention with his stolen work. He is irritated and jealous.” Will turn back to the corpse. There was still one more thing. “What are the meanings of the flowers?"

“Wait.” Beverly grabbed out her phone. “Primrose means eternal love, and hydrangea means heartfelt gratitude and understanding.”

Fuck.

“He has a crush.”

“It’s fucked up.” Will laughed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. The Ripper had a crush on him. When did he become a catnip to serial killers?

“It is very concerning to have the attention of a serial killer.” Hannibal placed a hand on Will’s shoulder blade to stop him wiggling in his laps. He kissed Will’s nape as a reward and continued toweling Will’s damp hair. “Are you certain he is interested in you?”

“He killed for me, twice,” Will said without sounding too glad. “The girl in the field is a gift for me, to help me understand the Shrike. And this time he spelled it out loud—he is grateful for being understood and he loves me.” He placed his hand on his chest, feeling his heart pumping fast. “I’m infamous for my empathy. He knows I can understand him. He knows I can see Abel Gideon is an impostor. He knows I will appreciate his art.”

Hannibal removed the towel and wrapped his arms around Will’s waist. “I am jealous now.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, I am not eloping with him. I’m already married.”

“He does not know you are married.”

“Or does he?”

Hannibal sighed. “Do you think it is someone you know? Someone you have encountered?”

“He stopped two years ago. Perhaps I’ve met him during the investigation.” Will chewed his lip. He had interviewed some doctors and nurses, but none left him much impression. Except Hannibal.

He blinked. He turned around to look at his husband.

Hannibal fitted the profile. Well-educated. Having a medical background and sophisticated taste of arts…

“Will?”

No, no. The Ripper was a cruel sadist. Even if he could love someone, the love he had would only be something similar to possessiveness. He would not have such a soft and lovesick look on his face.

Hannibal rose, applauding as the soprano bowed gracefully. Will followed him, glad that half of the night had already passed.

Hannibal's hand returned to him even before they left their seats, soothing him with chaste touches on his back. "It's not as horrendous as you thought, is it?"

Will chuckled at the tickling on his ear, his face heated up slightly even though he had not touched a drop of alcohol yet. "The worst part hasn't come yet."

"We will only talk to a few acquaintances of mine, and go home directly." Hannibal helped him to take a glass. "I promise I will protect you if they want to eat you alive."

Hannibal winked with his most charming smile. Will's gaze fled like a fidgety rabbit, but his blush was impossible to cover and drew Hannibal's lips to his cheek.

Will huffed, "It seems that you are the one who wants to eat me alive, Doctor."

"I always want to eat you, mongoose." Hannibal grinned with no shame. He did not even school his expression when someone approached them—an elegant woman wearing a red dress and a wide smile.

"Oh, Hannibal, who is this beautiful man in your arms?"

"He is Will Graham, my husband," Hannibal said in pride. "Will, this is Mrs. Komeda."

Will shook hands with the lady who regarded him in delight.

"Hannibal is extremely reluctant to tell anything about you," she said. "I even began to believe that he says he is married only to stop everyone pestering him. You know, half of Baltimore has fallen under his spell."

Will laughed. "I would too if I had his good looks."

Hannibal shook his head and placed a sentimental kiss on Will's cheek. "You are more attractive than I am."

"Look at you two." Mrs. Komeda smiled in awe. "How did you meet each other? And when did you get married? Tell me everything."

"Er, we met because of work," Will said.

“Will works for the FBI. He sought my help for a case two years ago.” Hannibal added. “I found my heart melt for him the instant I laid my eyes on him. We married each other last December in Florence.”

Will had had no idea what made Hannibal spend days showing him the drawings and photos of Florence to persuade him to have a Christmas trip there. On the first day in Florence after visiting the Uffizi Gallery, they watched the sunset in the Ponte Santa Trinita. It was snowing. The white snowflakes danced and fell, lit by the golden rays of the sun.

Hannibal asked him, “Did you enjoy today, Will?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like this place?”

“Yeah.”

Hannibal turned to face him with a smile, his eyes however refused to look at Will. He looked somehow nervous, concerned. Will had never seen him act like that before. Will frowned in confusion, but then Hannibal knelt down and took out a small velvet box.

“Will you marry me?”

Hannibal used only four words to make him cry.

Damn romantic bastard.

Will could not stop smiling every time he thought of that day.

Hannibal kissed his cheek. “I would say I am the luckiest man in the world.”

“I am glad that you have finally found your special someone.” Mrs. Komeda teased Hannibal. “I see I cannot blame you for not joining social events and holding dinner parties anymore.”

“Come to my house and I will cook for you.”

“I mean a dinner party.”

“Once inspiration strikes.” Hannibal raised his chin. “I cannot force a feast. A feast must present itself.”

“Don’t you dare to say that Will cannot be your muse.”

Will raised his head from his glass as his name was called. He looked at Hannibal with a challenging smile.

Hannibal leaned to Will for another kiss, but he turned his face away with a frown suddenly. Will shifted his gaze at that direction, finding a peculiar duo.

The sweaty man gawked at Hannibal like a child waiting for praise.

“Hello.” Hannibal shook the man’s hand, eyes narrowed covertly.

“Hi! Nice to see you.” The man had no awareness of Hannibal’s disinterest. “This is my friend, Tobias.”

Hannibal looked at the tall, grim man. His smile appeared more friendly now. “Good evening.” He shook Tobias’ hand, firm and weirdly confronting. A dark sparkle flashed between their gaze.

Will tilted his head. Hannibal’s hand went back to his waist quickly. It drew the attention of the sweaty man to Will.

“I am Franklyn Froidevaux, Dr. Lecter’s patient,” the man said as if it was the greatest honour, which nearly made Will laugh. “And you are?”

“Will Graham.” Will shook Franklyn’s hand and immediately regretted it.

Hannibal grabbed Will’s hand when they finished the unfortunate greeting, not minding the sweat. Will threw his husband an understanding look. Hannibal gave him a contrived smile.

Franklyn stared at them, confused and sour. “You are also one of his patients?”

What a pathetic attempt to try getting the attention back. Will turned his face away and sipped his champagne, leaving the trouble to Hannibal.

“Will is my husband.” Hannibal shattered the false hope without mercy.

Sadistic. Will loved it. He showed a shy smile to hide his own cruelty.

“I’ve read about you in Tattle Crime, Mr. Graham,” Tobias said. “They said you can think like any serial killer, and suggested you might even be one of them.”

Damn Freddie Lounds. Her name was even famous among the upper class.

“It is not wise to trust everything in the internet,” Will said. “I can think like anyone, not limited to serial killers.”

“It is a skill which makes Will an outstanding profiler. He has saved many lives.” Hannibal smiles proudly. Will suspected that Hannibal always wanted to take him to social events was only to show him off to other people.

Franklyn still had something in his mouth, but Hannibal shook his hand and Tobias’ again.

“Now if you excuse us…” Clearly done with his clingy patient, Hannibal quickly took Will out of the crowd.

Will could not suppress his smirk any longer when they stepped out of the building. “Now I’ve finally found something that can scare you off.”

Hannibal drew a breath. “I apologize for Franklyn ruining this night. I did not expect to see him here.”

“It’s ok.” Will patted Hannibal’s arm. “He’s amusing.”

Hannibal stared at him. “Amusing?” He repeated as if the word had offended him.

“Yeah, Amusing.” Like an insect which could entertain him for a while. Oh, he loved tearing off their legs and wings and seeing them struggle in vain.

“I am planning to refer him,” Hannibal said.

“You will lose all the fun then.”

Hannibal regarded him with a martyred look.

“Indeed it has been a long time since I held a dinner party,” Hannibal said when they reached his car. He fondled Will’s cheek with a clear hope.

“I am not joining.” Will looked away from his husband’s begging look.

“Everyone wants to meet the beautiful man who has stolen my heart, my love.” Hannibal brushed his lips against Will’s ear, painting the skin pink.

It was the alcohol. Will argued. “No. They want to interrogate me to know how to steal your heart.”

Hannibal laughed. “You have my company.”

“I only want your company.”

Hannibal kissed him. “Let’s go home?”

Will nodded and pecked Hannibal’s cheek in return, who smiled at him with the silly infatuated look again.

Will rolled his eyes and shove Hannibal’s chest. “Let’s go home now.”

“Will.”

A strong hand squeezed Will’s shoulder.

Will woke with a start, nearly bumping his head on Hannibal’s forehead.

“What?” He glanced around. He was still sitting on the couch in Hannibal’s living room, fire crackling, no danger hiding in the room.

“I only left you a minute to pour us wine, and you had already drifted off.” Hannibal ruffled Will’s hair. “Do you want to go to bed now?”

“I’m ok.” Will reached to the coffee table for his wine glass.

“Did you sleep last night?” Hannibal sat next to him.

“I tried, but Jack didn’t let me.” Will rubbed his tied brows. “They found a body in a hotel room. Jack rang me a dozen times, banged my door, and dragged me out of my bed. Luckily you weren’t staying last night, or he would definitely find us naked in the bed—‘what the fuck are you doing?’ He would ask. ‘Hm, fucking each other?’ I would say.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I suggest installing an alarm system in your house or training your dogs to bite any intruders. They are too friendly.”

Will agreed, considering how easy that Hannibal had only used a few pieces of sausage to buy their loyalty. “Anyway, he thought it was the Ripper but it’s obviously not.”

“It isn’t?”

“It’s in a filthy hotel.” He doubted the Ripper would ever step into a place like that. “The killer sedated the victim and took his kidney. The victim woke up, panicked, tore the sutures and fell onto the bathtub, passed out. The killer cut open his chest wall, broke his ribs, and grabbed his heart.”

“Internal cardiac massage?”

Will gave a few nods. “No torturing. No pain. He even wanted to save the man’s life. It’s only a back-alley surgery which went bad. A boring case.”

“I might have a theory about the Ripper,” Hannibal said after a moment.

“Do tell.”

Hannibal put down his glass, clasping his hands on his laps. “You said the Ripper takes his victims’ organs because he thinks they do not deserve them. Would it be possible that he gives the organs to the people who truly deserve them?”

“Organ harvester?”

“Jack Crawford’s looking for a serial killer he can’t seem to catch. It’s a brilliant diversion.”

Will hummed. It made sense though. “I will keep it in mind if another body drops.”

When they finished their glasses Hannibal said, “I plan to go to another opera tomorrow night. I might come back late. Don’t wait for me.”

“We just went to an opera last week.”

“Indeed.” Hannibal kissed Will. “I met an old friend today. He invited me to attend an opera. I could not refuse.”

“That’s why I don’t make friends.” Will pouted and a yawn rose from his throat, his eyelids dropping further and further.

Hannibal gave a kiss on his forehead and carried him to their bed.

The next night Will stayed at Hannibal’s house and ate the food left for him. He wanted to wait for Hannibal, though their bed was so soft that it lured him to sleep within fifteen minutes. He stirred when faint sounds from downstairs reached his ears.

The other side of the bed was still empty.

Another thud.

Will left the bed and staggered out of the room, his mind dizzy and his legs wobbly, he hardly managed to descend the stairs.

“Hanni?”

He rubbed his sore eyelids, but they snapped back close as the blinding light from the kitchen hit his face. He groaned and leaned against the wall, legs too weak to move again.

Click.

“Hannibal? Is that you?”

“Will.” Only Hannibal’s sound came and greeted him. “Did I wake you?”

“Hmm… What time is it? What are you doing in the kitchen? I’ve washed all the dishes…”

“Of course you did. I am only getting myself a cup of water. Go back to sleep, beloved. I will be there soon.”

Pouting, Will went back to their bed. The next time he opened his eyes the mattress sagged and the familiar warmth enveloped him.

“What took you so long?” Will grunted.

“I am sorry, my love. I am here now.”

Hannibal kissed his nape and he fell back into his dream.

The night after that Hannibal was having his old friend for dinner, so Will went back to Wolf Trap.

The next day Hannibal stayed in Will’s house. Will swore he was not that tired, but he kept yawning after their meal, and he passed out right after his head hit his pillow. They spent the

night together doing nothing.

The Organ Harvester and the Ripper were having their fun however. It had been raining corpses.

Will massaged his shoulders while staring at the straight row of bodies.

“They’re all missing different organs,” Jimmy said. “We were looking at waiting lists for a heart or kidney. Now we’ve got kidneys, hearts, livers, stomachs, pancreases, lungs. One of them is missing a spleen. Who the hell gets a spleen transplant?”

Will pointed at one of the corpses. “Intestines were the only thing missing from this body?” Why not take all the organs away if they are all valuable?

Brian nodded with a grimace. “ So we're either looking for someone with short bowels or Ripper's making sausage.”

Will stopped tapping his lips. He raised his head.

The rest of the conversation slipped through Will’s mind till Jack snapped his fingers in front of his nose.

“How many killers, Will?”

Will drew a breath, pressing the back of his head against the cold wall.  “Two.”

“And you’re confident one of them is the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Will nodded, still staring at the darkness of his mind raptly instead of the reality. “At least one of them.”

The stag trudged through the snow. Glittering guts dangled on his crown. Blood formed tortuous rivers running from his branches through his glorious fur and feather. He twisted his ears and greeted Will with a soft huff, mist spilling out from his blood-covered snout.

“Will?”

The beast looked up.

“Will.”

He fled.

Will blinked. The whiteness dissolved. He looked up from his table paved with the crime scenes photos. Hannibal’s smile and a thermal bag greeted him.

“I texted you that I have eaten already.” Will returned the smile, pushing away the paper to let Hannibal place down the bag.

“Therefore I only brought you dessert.” Hannibal pried open the container lid to reveal a piece of Black Forest Cake. The beautiful sight made Will’s mouth water.

“Thank you. I love you.” Will picked up the fork and took a large bite without waiting.

“I love you too.” Hannibal fondled Will’s hair. “Where have you been, my love? You weren’t present, eyes opened, staring into middle distance.”

“Just inside.” Will shrugged and licked away the chocolate on his lips. “I tried to see the Ripper.”

Hannibal glanced at the photos. “You think he is responsible for all these bodies?”

Will nodded and took another bite. “I think he wants to disguise himself as the Organ Harvester to play with us. He has become very active, like a beast woken from its long slumber. Or he’s just that active all the time, he’s just good at hiding it.”

“There are always people who are in need of an organ transplant.”

“I don’t think he takes the organs for transplant.” Will fidgeted his fork. “I think he is eating them.”

Hannibal raised his gaze to him. “A cannibal like the Shrike?”

“He is nothing like the Shirke. He eats them ‘cause it’s the natural order. They’re prey and he’s a top predator. He literally sees them as pigs.”

“What gave it away?”

Will shrugged. “There’s a body missing only the intestine. Brian joked that The Ripper is probably making sausage, and it clicked.”

Hannibal looked at him without blinking, impressed. “You have unraveled the Ripper’s mind only based on a sick joke.”

“I’m not even close.” Will put down his fork and wiped his mouth. “I don’t know how he chooses his victims, and why he doesn’t take away all the organs. That wastes a lot of meat.”

Hannibal hummed and helped him to pack up the utensils. “Perhaps he only takes what he can consume. The meat will spoil if he cannot eat them quickly.”

“He’s taken too much meat recently.”

Would the Ripper want to eat his heart? When it was still raw and beating? Will shivered slightly.

Sounds of footsteps drew their gazes to the door, revealing Jack and Beverly.

“Dr. Lecter. What a nice surprise.” Jack nodded at Hannibal, eyes brimming with excitement. “We have a lead on the Ripper. Care to help us catch him?”

Hannibal offered a curious smile. “How could I refuse?”

They easily located the missing ambulance with a DF sweep. Will followed Jack and other agents marching to it without much interest. The real Ripper would never make a mistake like this. He had his own party room.

“Dr. Lecter!” Jack called.

Will looked at Hannibal, who looked back in surprise. They hurried to the car. Hannibal took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, burying his arm into the perishing life. He conquered death with ease.

Will swallowed unconsciously.

Hannibal’s cold eyes met his burning gaze.

# Chapter 7

The Organ Harvester had no intention of taking his victims' lives. Such a layman did not deserve a killer's name.

Hannibal shook his head as Jack urged the man out of the car with laughable seriousness and complete ignorance to the real beast hiding in the plain sight.

Will stayed at the same spot however, having no interest in the "killer", eyes only fixed on him. Darkness veiled his face.

The hair on Hannibal's scruff woke at once. He froze instinctively, as if he was caught under a spotlight, having nowhere to hide from Will's dark gaze.

Did Will realize he matched the profile of the Ripper? Did he catch the shape of the beast in his eyes?

When Hannibal left the ambulance, Will approached him under his watchful gaze. Light finally lit Will's face, washing away the perturbing shadow. His eyes sparkled as he smiled sweetly. "You still remember how to be a doctor."

Hannibal returned a smile and relaxed slightly. "It is difficult to unlearn a skill. Stopping the bleeding is rather a simple task."

Will grabbed Hannibal's arms with a shake of his head, looking into Hannibal's eyes in admiration. "You saved his life. You are a hero." He chuckled shyly and pecked Hannibal's lips. His pupils dilated in his beautiful irises.

Will looked at him during the whole journey, and once they returned to Hannibal's house, he pushed Hannibal to the wall with a grin.

"You are incensed. What brought on this passion tonight?" Hannibal breathed under Will's craving lips.

Will shrugged off his jacket and ripped away the one on Hannibal, his breath quickened already. "You haven't touched me for *months*. Jack caught the killer, nothing can stop us tonight."

"It has only been a few days." Hannibal branded a smile on Will's cheek as Will tore off his vest.

"And tomorrow night you are going to have your dumb party and be too busy to having your friends for dinner." Will pouted, too adorable that Hannibal could not chide him for being unceremonious.

“I can always add a seat for you.”

“No, you won't do that.” Will ran his gaze over Hannibal’s lips while licking his own. “You want to serve me in a dish.” He glanced up and his smile enchanted Hannibal’s heart for an uncountable time.

“Indeed.” Hannibal found himself uttering.

Will laughed like a mischievous nymph. “Come and eat me then.” He scooted off upstairs, triggering Hannibal’s predatory instincts.

Hannibal chased Will without a thought. He shoved open the bedroom door when Will tried to lock it.

Knowing well that he had no strength to fight Hannibal, Will fled to their bed where he got pinned down the next second. He shrieked and hit Hannibal’s chest playfully. “It is not fair. You are way too fast.”

“There is no fairness in nature.” Hannibal nipped at Will’s lips. “I have caught you. You are mine now.”

Will giggled at his wolfish look, naive and bold like a fawn. “I’m yours already.”

Hannibal kissed Will with a sigh.

Not being shy, Will grabbed his hair and let him in eagerly, sliding their tongues together as he tangled his legs around Hannibal’s waist.

Hannibal shushed at the impatience as Will groaned for being pushed back. He teased Will with a light stroke on his groin. “I would have remain a surgeon if I had known it could have this effect on you.”

Will huffed. “You just look hot with bare arms. Though being a doctor is also hot. Do you still keep your white coat? I bet you will be hot as hell in that. I might need CPR if you wear it.” He unbuttoned his shirt and revealed his inviting skin to Hannibal.

Hannibal bit back a growl and landed his lips and hands on Will’s chest reverently. “I would like to see you in your uniform too.”

“I still have the gun.” Will bucked his hips. “You wanna see it?”

“I thought it should be held in your gun holster.” Hannibal ran his hands over Will’s belt, but Will smacked him.

“Of course it is in the gun holster. What are you thinking about? You are so dirty.”

“Am I?” Hannibal pressed his palm on Will’s clothed erection and squeezed out moans from Will.

Will went limp instantly. He threw back his head and splayed his legs apart, an enticing sight Hannibal had no strength to resist.

Hannibal buried his face in Will's throat to suck and nibble at the fragile skin. The vague groans vibrated beneath his lips as he drew away Will's belt. He rose and sat on his ankles, taking his time to unzip Will's pants and rub Will's cock.

Will writhed blindly. A wet spot spread on the fabric of his thin boxers.

Hannibal bent over to take a deep stiff at Will's crotch. "You are intoxicating." He looked up to see Will blush deeper. Lovely.

Hannibal licked his lips and striped away all Will's clothes. Will was shy now; he closed his eyes shut and tried to hide away. Hannibal grabbed Will's knees and soothed him by kissing his inner thighs. Will's breath quickened as the kisses descended closer and closer to his cock. He shivered with a groan when Hannibal kissed the tip.

"You are delicious, my love." Hannibal purposely let his breath strike Will's length.

"Eat me right now." Will pushed Hannibal's head in desperation.

Hannibal groaned and let Will guide him down, wrapping his lips around the luscious glans. He sucked and teased Will with the tip of his tongue till Will panted with a broken noise, then he took the whole cock in, his nose brushing Will's pubic hair, breathing in the tangy scents of salt and musk.

Will had lost all his strength, pliant, trembling adorably beneath him. Hannibal rose and swallowed Will back slowly. Will gripped his hair, whining, "I, I can't…"

Hannibal loved to make Will come in his mouth, but Will was right, they had not touched each other quite a while. There was more he wanted.

Hannibal crawled up and rolled Will onto his stomach. Will cursed when he grabbed his bottom, but he did not give Will time to prepare. He parted Will's cheeks and ran his tongue from his perineum to his hole. Will tensed and shuddered, arching back to seek more. Hannibal planted his lips on Will's hole, kissing away the nervousness before licking it to coax it open. He breached in as soon as Will relaxed slightly.

Will clenched around his tongue, pleading in moans. "Hanni… Get inside…"

The sobbing made Hannibal want to tease Will till he cried, but his own desire ached badly and could not be ignored anymore. He left a kiss before reaching to the drawer. He took off his clothes and coated himself with the lube sloppily, squeezing Will's cheek with the other hand.

But Will turned around, looking at him with misty eyes. "I want to see you."

"I am naked before you." Hannibal smiled on Will's lips. "My heart and my soul."

He parted Will's thighs and rubbed his cock against Will's hole tentatively. Will did not avert his gaze, but was still shy and only gave Hannibal a nod. Hannibal pushed in. Will quiverd poorly around his thickness. Hannibal bit his lips to remind himself to be slow and careful. He waited for Will to breathe again, slowly diving deeper.

"Hannibal." Will sighed when he buried himself completely inside.

They were conjoined and whole again.

Sex had been always a tool for Hannibal to manipulate the others, but sex with Will… everything with Will was different.

Will had melted his cruel heart.

"I love you, Will." Hannibal breathed.

He began moving, gentle and loving, though Will soon asked for more.

"Harder." Will demanded. "I'm not a fucking teacup. You won't break me."

Hannibal complied. He held Will's hips and sped up. Will groaned and whined and sucked him hard. Hannibal growled, nearly losing all his control. Will was no better than him. Will struggled and clawed at the cover, drowned in the heat, yelling Hannibal's name in his whimpers. Hannibal responded by increasing his pace. Will screamed and arched his body, clutching Hannibal hard and pushing him to the peak together.

Their eye contact didn't break.

Hannibal drew away carefully. The glittering liquid on Will's stomach tempted his lips, but Will called him and reached to him. Nothing was left in his mind. He crawled to Will and lay beside him.

Will sprawled on Hannibal, resting his head on Hannibal's chest. They both loved to hear each other's heartbeats.

"You saved a life today," Will murmured.

"I did."

After a few breaths Will shifted away and lay on his side to face Hannibal. "Can I ask you something?"

Hannibal blinked at Will's sudden carefulness. "You are already asking me something."

Will beamed and shook his head. "I think it will upset you."

Hannibal reassured Will with a kiss. "How do you know it will upset me if you have not asked yet?"

"Ok…" Will bit his lips. "You said you wanted to be a doctor because of Mischa."

Hannibal nodded in slight confusion.

Will drew a breath. “You’ve never told me how she died. Was it sickness? An accident?”

The locked doors in Hannibal’s mind shook under Will’s gaze. Hannibal’s heart shuddered, worrying Will could see his terrifying past and be dragged down into his inferno. He closed his eyes to protect both of them.

Will’s finger tips traced his cheekbone softly. He nuzzled against Will’s palm.

“Starvation.” He let out the half-truth, silently begging Will not to ask for the details.

Will whispered, “You would be a different man if Mischa had survived.”

“Yes.” He probably would not become a killer. He would live in an ordinary life. Would he still be able to meet Will? Would they still be lovers?

A soft kiss brought him back.

“I love you too.” Will smiled and sat up, tugging his arm. “Come and join me?”

Will went into the bathroom before Hannibal could respond. Hannibal rose quickly. He would follow his love wherever he went.

An unexpected knock interrupted Hannibal’s drawing. He glanced at his watch and closed the sketch book to hide the rendition of his love before going to open the door.

The beautiful eyes he had been yearning for greeted him in the golden sunshine. He lost his breath, unable to blink, afraid that a flutter of his eyelids would be enough to break this moment. But Will laughed at him. Hannibal pursed his lips, though he still did not dare to blink to miss a slight movement of his love. Will laughed again.

Hannibal straightened himself dignifiedly. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No.” Will lifted his chin and looked over Hannibal’s shoulder. “I’m here to find my husband.”

Hannibal pressed down his lips against his rising smile. “I don’t believe your husband is here. You can see we are the only ones in this room at this moment. Perhaps you can tell me his name and I can see if he is one of my patients.”

“He’s not a patient. He’s a damn charming shrink working here and now grinning at me like a freaking idiot.” Will grabbed Hannibal’s lapels to yank him into a kiss.

“You smell of death,” Hannibal muttered on Will’s lips.

Will rolled his eyes. “That’s very romantic, Doctor.”

Hannibal widened his smile and let Will in. “I am jealous. You have had a date with Death again. What is special about him to have you enchanted?” He helped Will to take off his jacket while sniffing him out of habit.

“No, I’ve met the prince of hell. He is very hot and horny.” Will smirked at Hannibal and wandered off, picking his seat at the edge of Hannibal’s desk.

“We’ve found a body in a concert hall. Put on stage with a cello neck coming out from his throat to his mouth.” His gaze stopped in mid-air, unfocused. When he spoke again, he uttered words that did not belong to him—“*I put him on the stage and under the light. He is dressed. His skin is pale but has no blood on it. He is not a corpse. Not a person. He is a tool, a new instrument for me to play. I play him. The piece I created echoes in his flesh and bones.*”

Will fell into silence, his eyes dim, hand still fidgeting the scalpel with his fingers swimming on the blade carelessly.

Hannibal wanted to wait for Will to come back, but seeing the blade was about to draw blood from Will’s delicate skin, he stepped forth and grabbed Will’s wrist. Will looked at him, cold and strange. His heart thumped, but it could not deter him.

“You will hurt yourself, Will.” He crooned, coaxing Will’s fingers into loosening the grip.

Will watched the blade slide out of his hand. “Don’t you want to see me bleed?"

The sight of Will bathed in blood was appetizing, but not in his own blood. No. Hannibal shook his head. “Never, my love.” He squeezed Will’s hand. “Come back here.”

Will hummed. “I’m not lost.”

Hannibal studied the shade on Will’s face for a while before placing down the scalpel and sitting on his desk as well. “Among the first musical instruments were flutes carved from human bone.”

Will took an audible breath. “This murder was a performance.”

“Every life is a piece of music.” Hannibal covered Will’s hand. “Like music, we are finite events, unique arrangements. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant.”

“Sometimes not worth hearing again.” Will snorted. “He shrank and tanned the vocal cords, like turning iron wire into string.”

“Was there olive oil?”

Will looked at him with widened eyes. The adorable look hooked up Hannibal’s lips.

“I smelled in on you,” he said, bringing Will’s hand to his nose for a better sniff. “Whatever sound he was trying to produce, it was an authentic one. Olive oil hasn’t been used in the production of catgut for over a century. It was said to increase the life of the strings and create a sweeter, more melodic sound.”

“Putting that much effort into a corpse… ” Will hopped down and walked towards Hannibal’s harpsichord. “His audience must be someone who can appreciate this kind of art.”

Hannibal followed Will. “Another killer?”

“Likely.” Will hovered his fingers on the keys, stroking the air above them.

“Are they friends? Partners?”

“He wants to show them how well he plays, to prove himself worthy of a company.”

“I had assumed most serial killers work like lone wolves. Yet, we have a killer seeking company.”

“Only a lone wolf when they’re hunting.” Will tugged up his lips. “Some of them have built themselves a happy family. Not even their partners know their true faces. Not until they make a mistake or decide to be honest. But deep inside their hearts they want to be less lonely, like anyone else.” He sat down, played a few notes randomly, and stopped with a sheepish smile. “Haven’t played for ages.”

“The case makes you want to play.” Hannibal bent to kiss Will’s hair.

Will looked up at him. “Come and play with me.”

Hannibal obeyed happily. “Where shall we begin?”

Silencing the bell in his gloved hand, Hannibal stepped into the shop, welcomed by the scents of woods, rosin, guts, and death he had smelled in the opera house, a testament to Tobias’ true identity. Hannibal wondered what or who had enlightened Tobias that he was a killer as well, and if Tobias knew he was the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will had gotten closer to the Ripper even though Hannibal had disguised himself as the Organ Harvester; he had underestimated Will, whose eyes would never be fooled by any illusion or trick.

Now one more misstep might be enough to draw Will’s attention to him.

Will was not ready yet. He must not know.

Tobias Budge was an imminent threat and must be removed.

Hannibal flexed his hands. Some familiar scents hit his nose as he advanced further, fish, stray dogs, and the aftershave he had picked carefully for… Will's voice reached his ear —"You only have gut strings here?"

Hannibal paced up and looked into the back room. Fate had orchestrated another trick to him.

"Will?"

Will looked up and almost dropped the coil of catgut in his gloved hands. "Hannibal? What are you doing here?"

"The harpsichord in my house needs new strings. It's making an awful noise," Hannibal said smoothly. He had intended to lure the killer into his house. Tobias was lucky that Will was here today.

Will hummed and put down the strings, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets. Strangely he was not wearing his glasses.

"So you only have catgut?" Will turned his bare gaze to Tobias, who regarded them in cautiousness.

Facing a brutal killer and an FBI agent at the same time was indeed an unnerving experience. Hannibal stood at ease however, knowing well that Will was always on his side.

"I also carry steel and polymer strings," Tobias said with faint distaste, "if you prefer."

"I only need piano wires," Will said.

Tobias nodded and looked at Hannibal, "You are Doctor Lecter, right? You also need wires for your harpsichord?"

"I prefer gut." Hannibal smiled. "Harps found in the tombs of Thebes strung with gut still made music after two thousands years."

It satisfied the killer. Will's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Did you make the catgut all by yourself?" Will glanced at the array of the cellos.

Hannibal wondered if he could see the paleness of corpses' skin and hear their screams dancing on the strings.

"Imported from Italy," Tobias answered. Blatant lie.

Will showed nothing though, his tones casual. "Do they use olive oil?" He smiled innocently. "Hannibal told me that olive oil can help the catgut to produce a sweeter sound. I think he would like to have those strings. And, ah, I should go now. Just looking around. I'll buy something next time."

Hannibal bid a brief goodbye as well and followed Will outside, who looked back at him with a bitter curve on his lips.

“Go buy the strings. I’m not asking you to come with me.”

Will’s words somehow tasted like a spicy vinegar.

“I only want you.” Hannibal held Will’s hand.

What had upset Will?

Will had given him a soft kiss and a shy smile when they had parted this morning. His warmth and sweetness were still lingering on his lips.

Hannibal stroked Will’s face and tilted his head to peck Will’s lips, asking Will silently.

Will’s frown relented, but he only said, “Let’s go home.”

Will was less talkative during the whole day. Hannibal tried to catch his eyes at least, but Will shied away every time. He said he just needed some time to think. He said he could stay tonight but he went to their bedroom an hour earlier than usual. Hannibal spent a few minutes staring at his novel before following Will’s steps quickly.

Will leaned to him when he tentatively placed a hand on his waist. He sighed and wrapped Will in his arm.

An unknown amount of time had passed when Hannibal finally drifted into sleep. A sudden shift of weight on the mattress made him stir. He pried open his sore eyelids and caught Will’s blurry silhouette shuffling into the bathroom. Not paying much attention, he rolled onto his back and closed back his eyes, waiting for Will to return. But the bedroom door opened and shut. Hannibal rose.

Perhaps Will was going to the kitchen for a cup of water.

He told himself, and the sound of the front door crushed his ears.

Will must be going out for a walk. Nothing worrisome. He would come back soon.

Yet, unable to lie back onto the empty bed, Hannibal went to his study to read something. Not a single word could get into his mind.

Thirty minutes later he found himself standing at the window to watch the street. Will was nowhere to be found.

Half an hour later Hannibal sat in the foyer, staring at the door without blinking. He dozed off for a while. The world was silent as death. He called Will. Will did not answer.

Hannibal cursed himself for acting like an abandoned puppy. He pondered if Will’s pack would stay at the door the whole night when Will was not there. He wondered if Will had gone back to Wolf Trap.

Nearly two hours after Will had left, fear flooded Hannibal's mind.

Will had never gone for a walk that long. What if something had happened to him? What if he had run into a robber or a killer?

Hannibal stood on wobbly legs, and the door clicked.

Will appeared along with a strong rancid smell.

"What are you doing here?" He frowned at Hannibal's disheveled hair and clothes. His breath smelled of cheese and soda.

"Where did you go, Will? I was worried about you." Hannibal grabbed Will's hands, not caring about the cold and the grease.

"Just went for a walk. Got hungry so I went to eat something." Will shrugged off his jacket and hung it himself.

Hannibal lowered his arms helplessly. "You could have woken me. I could cook you something."

"Didn't want to bother you," Will murmured. "I'm going to take a shower."

Hannibal waited in their bed. Will emerged from the bathroom a while later, surprised to see him still awake.

"Go to sleep, Hanni." Will climbed onto the bed and pushed Hannibal's chest, leaving a wet mark on his shirt.

Hannibal closed his eyes to hide his weakness. "Will…did I do something that made you angry with me?"

Will's palm fondled his cheek. "What made you think that?" He asked, printing the scents of mint and sugar on Hannibal's lips with a faint copper taste.

Will backed away before he could inquire. "Let's sleep."

They lay back together. Will rest his head on Hannibal's chest. Hannibal sighed and relaxed. His heart must sound like a crying bird to Will.

The deafening vibration of Will's phone shoved both of them out of their dreams.

Will groaned and kicked their duvet away. Hannibal shivered in the sudden coldness, turning his head to the windows as Will crawled up to the nightstand. It was pitch-dark behind the

curtains.

“Jack, you don’t need to sleep but I do,” Will said almost without a sound. A few seconds later his face went blank. He mumbled he would be there soon and ended the call, turning to Hannibal while swallowing hard.

“What happened?” Hannibal rose in concern.

Will breathed in, his voice croaked like an owl shrieking a death knell— “Tobias Budge is dead.”

Viscous air from an old butcher's had filled the strings shop whose walls were decorated with impromptu splashes and strokes of crimson. Blood swept into the fabric of the wood and the dead cells of the gut strings.

Tobias Budge was hung by his jaw and twisted arms with fishing lines and hooks, glittering in the first ray of the day. The strings of the cello neck vibrated in his exposed throat. His chest was cracked open like a shark mouth. Guts piled on the carpet, rotting, leaking a malodorous substance. Instead of a gutted fish, he looked like a butchered pig.

Wrath echoed in the room like a sound from an ancient horn.

“Someone sent Freddie Lounds the picture of it around two this morning,” Jack said. “They made a comment about it: ‘what a performance.’”

Will hummed, leaving  Hannibal’s side. “He’d had fun.”

“It sounds like something an audience would say.” Jack raised his hand. “You said the Cello Maker was performing to someone else. Would that be the same person that watched him kill and took the picture?”

“The Cello Maker didn’t do this.” Will shook his head. “He sees his victim as a tool. He put lots of effort to make a perfect instrument out of a corpse, not, not like this.”

He took off his glasses and faced the distorted body. His profile was backlit in sunlight, making him look like the merciless angel of death. Hannibal’s heart ached at his beauty. He could not resist imagining Will standing in front of a dying pig, cutting their throat, nonchalant and cruel, bathed in the ink-like blood.

“This killer was mocking him.” Will’s mumble drew him back. “He twisted his limbs, hung him up, stabbed him to death, and continued after he was dead. He was angry with Tobias Budge. He wanted to induce as much pain as possible.”

“They had a history?”

“Not necessary.” Will’s eyes followed the waterfall of blood to the guts on the floor. “Perhaps it was simply because he was disgusted with what Tobias had done.”

“What had he done?”

Will huffed. “He was either an animal abuser or a criminal, or both.”

“The Fisherman only kills two types of people.” Hannibal shifted his gaze from Will to the hooks on the corpse.

“But he’s never taken organs before.” Brian pointed out Hannibal’s concern. “This man is missing a heart.”

Will shrugged. “He’s changed.”

“So he killed this guy because of the catgut?” Jimmy raised his brows at the instruments. “I guess he is going to kill a lot of musicians now.”

“You should check the strings here.” Will glanced around. “He probably used human guts to make them—that’s the reason why the killer stuffed the cello neck into his throat, telling us that he was the Cello Maker.” He put on his glasses, shaking his head with a twisted smile. “Once again the Fisherman went ahead of us.”

He went back to Hannibal’s side and nudged his elbow to urge him to leave. Jack called to him as they turned to leave.

“You can’t catch him, Jack. He’s like the Ripper,” Will said. “Perhaps it’s better to leave him be. He can take down murderers for you, lessen your burdens.”

Will dragged Hannibal out of the shop and shoved his hands into his pockets. “What a good way to start your day. Body as bread and blood as milk.”

Hannibal smiled. “Have you lost your appetite?”

“Have you?” Will grinned. “I’m starving.”

Will helped Hannibal chop bell peppers, onions, and potatoes before leaning against the counter with his coffee mug. He had loosened the cuffs and collar of his blue plaid shirt, and revealed more of his delicate skin as he tilted his head to observe the milky flow of the food’s aroma. Hannibal licked his lips secretly before tearing his gaze off Will and taking the bacon out of the frying pan.

“Death follows me everywhere,” Will said. “Garret Jacob Hobbs, the Angel Maker, and this killer… they all died. It is not something a coincidence could explain.”

“You think you are cursed?” Hannibal smiled and added the rest of the ingredients into the pan. He could not say anything about the first two cases, but he also had a bizarre hunch that the Fisherman had intended to help him to take care of Tobias Budge.

Will shook his head. “I think they are killed by the same killer.”

Hannibal paused his spatula. “They were killed in very distinct ways.”

“He can change his style, can’t he? Just like the Ripper.”

“You suspect someone in the FBI or even in your team is the Fisherman?”

Will placed down his cup and walked closer to Hannibal. “How do you see the Fisherman?”

“A vigilante. An animal lover who values animals’ lives more than people’s. He sees those who abuse animals worse than those who rape or kill. Fishing is an important part of his life, his habit or his job. He is possibly a hermit, living alone and near the wild, having animals as his loyal companies. No one could see the wildness inside him. He appears a quiet, lonely man. Ordinary. Nothing unusual.” Hannibal sprinkled the shredded cheese into the pan. “Somehow he can tell if you are guilty or not, like the Angel Maker.”

“The Angel Maker believed he could tell, but the Fisherman knows he can tell.” Will grabbed Hannibal’s hand and turned off the stove. “But how do you see him? Is he as great as the Ripper?”

Hannibal blinked in confusion, but he answered it regardless, “He is skillful, yet impulsive and even sloppy. Unlike the Ripper, he is more like a sociopath, I would say.”

“So the cold, psychopathic Cello Maker is better than him? Deserves your attention more?” Will stared at him coldly. The sudden anger pained Hannibal.

“Will, I don’t understand…”

“Why did you go to the string shop yesterday?”

All the hair on Hannibal’s nape rose in alert. He put all his effort to maintain his calm expression, though he doubted it would work under Will’s piercing gaze. “As I told you it was for my harpsichord.”

Will drew a breath with a tremor. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

Will closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them to look at him. “Do you love me?”

Hannibal swallowed hard. The alarm in his head rang wildly. His arms tensed against his will, ready to grab a knife to fight. He swallowed again, voice dry. “I love you, Will.”

“He is like me,” Will whispered. “With a mirror in our minds. I can see through you just by looking into your eyes. You know that well but you still lied right to me. Am I not enough?

Why would you go to another killer when you already have me?”

“Will, I didn’t—”

“Go outside.” Will raised his arm. “Go to my car. There’s a cooler in my trunk. Open it and bring the box inside it here.”

Hannibal took off his apron and stepped out of the kitchen, unable to think properly. Will knew. When did Will find out? Yesterday? Was that why he appeared upset? Why wouldn’t he tell Jack and arrest him?

He walked down the hall, bereft, preparing to face guns and bullets, but nothing ambushed him when he opened the front door.

He stood for a while. It was still an early morning. Not even a pedestrian nor a bird entered his view.

He took Will’s car key and walked outside the house.

Only cladded in a sweater and a pair of slacks, he shivered in the frozen air. The sky hung over him like the heavy cloak of death.

A strong metallic scent struck him as he lift the trunk lid. He faced a familiar view however —the trunk had only a ragged blanket, a first-aid-kit box, a dog cage, fishing magazines and gears, and a cooler box in which he found a dark gift box larger than his palm resting in the ice fragments.

He took out the box carefully. The wine-red ribbon bounced in the breeze.

The box smelled of fresh blood and raw meat.

Hannibal’s heart pounded faster.

*A vigilante. An animal lover. Fishing is an important part of his life.*

He snapped up his head to stare at the fishing rod.

*He is like me. With a mirror in our minds.*

Hannibal clung the box close to his chest, shut the trunk, and rushed back into the house. He almost tripped over the mat. The door left open behind him. The only thing in his mind was the one who had held his heart, who was standing in front of the stove just like he had woken before Hannibal did and decided to surprise him with a simple breakfast.

The fragrance of eggs drifted in the kitchen.

Hannibal stayed at the door frame like a lost ghost.

“Come here,” Will said without looking at him, busy serving breakfast skillet.

Hannibal's legs moved autonomously. His throat tensed and his lips trembled, however unable to form any word.

"That's a gift for you." Will wiped his hands with a towel and nodded at the box. "Open it."

Hannibal placed the box onto the cold surface of the kitchen island. He pulled to loosen the ribbon with his unsteady fingers.

The lid felt almost heavier than what he could lift.

It revealed a human heart.

"Will." Hannibal gasped, his mind flooded with disbelief and joy and pride. Tears welled in his eyes. "Whose heart is it?" He asked in a soundless breath.

"Who do you think?" Will twisted his lips.

"Tobias Budge's?" Hannibal nearly feared to say it, feared it would smash his hope.

"I'd felt something wrong between you two in the opera night," Will said. "When I went to his shop and saw him again I knew he was the Cello Maker. Then you came. You were the one he'd performed for. He wanted a friend. And you accepted his invitation. You wanted him even when you already had me."

"He was nothing more than a pig. You are the only one I want. " Hannibal reached to grab Will's fists. "I went there not to befriend him, but to kill him. He had learnt what I am. He was a threat. You were too close, Will. One more clue and you would find out the truth. You would be upset. You would have felt betrayed by me. You would leave me. I could not risk it. I could not lose you. You are everything to me."

"You…" Will swallowed and looked away with a dry laugh. "Didn't you know that the more you killed, the more likely I would find out who you are?"

"I did." Hannibal leaned forth. "I stopped two years ago when I met you. I stopped for you."

"Not completely." Will pursed his lips, though his face softened.

Hannibal gave a small smile, raising his hand slowly to Will's cheek. "I killed again for you. I killed the girl to help you understand the Shrike, and I killed again to show you Gideon is an impostor."

"No. You did it because you were jealous of the Shrike and Gideon."

Hannibal breathed, "Yes."

Will stepped to him till their chests pressed together. He looked into his eyes and his heart and all the dark places in his mind as he opened to him with fear no longer.

"I can't blame you though." Will looked at the gift box. A bashful and childish smile emerged on his face, an angelic look which Hannibal could never possibly associate with the

horrific sight in the string shop.

“I was so blind.” Hannibal wrapped his arms around Will’s torso and sighed on Will’s lips. “We sleep in the same bed every night with no covering between our bodies, our breath melts together, our hearts beat along with each other, yet, I never saw your true beauty.”

“I couldn't see you as well. Damn your perfect human suit.” Will laughed. He nipped Hannibal’s lips and pulled away before it could turn into a proper kiss, as cruel as always.

“When did you find out?” Hannibal asked.

“I saw you when you were saving the man in the ambulance.”

“That was all?”

“Yeah.”

“What a remarkable boy you are.” Hannibal praised, painting a lovely pinkish shade on Will’s face.

“Let’s have breakfast.” Will looked away and took the plate to the dining room.

Smitten, Hannibal smiled at Will’s back for a moment before he placed the gift into the fridge and quickly joined Will at the dining table.

“My palate isn't as refined as yours,” Will said, throwing a slice of bacon into his mouth. “Is this made of long pig?”

Hannibal smiled at his mongoose’s curious look. “I used all of that meat in the dinner party.”

Will paused his fork, eyes narrowed. “You said you were going to attend an opera and have dinner with your friends, but you were actually going to kill. Did you drug me?”

“I added something in your food and beverage to help you sleep.”

Will snorted at the “help” while pulling up his sleeves to check his skin.

“I did not inject you with anything.” Hannibal sighed. “I could never bring myself to hurt you.”

Will raised his chin, amusement flickering in his eyes. “I always imagined the Ripper was a heartless beast that he would never have such dumb and lovesick puppy face.”

“It is exclusively for you.” Hannibal stretched his smile wider. He could tell his eyes were sparkling with endearment. He hid them with his lashes and took a forkful of scrambled eggs. “You do not differ much from how I pictured the Fisherman. Only you are too lovely and adorable.” He dropped his gaze to Will’s lips. Will showed him his teeth.

“That’s what I want everyone to see me. A broken puppy who doesn’t even know how to bite.” Will leaned at the back of his chair. His demeanour shifted instantly like the ever-

changing view in a kaleidoscope. He sat like a resting lion, relaxed but threatening, eyes locked on Hannibal.

Hannibal's hair prickled his skin. "Have you thought of killing the Ripper, Will?"

"You?" Will huffed. "I admire you."

"And I you."

They smiled at each other till the muscles in their faces ached.

"There's one thing I still can't figure out." Will sipped his orange juice. "How did you choose your victims? What makes you see them pigs?"

Hannibal stabbed a piece of bacon with his fork. "Their rudeness."

"So I can get myself killed simply by rolling my eyes at you?"

Hannibal chuckled. "I would never find you rude, mongoose."

"Even if I snored as loud as a thunder the whole night?"

"You would be as cute as a purring cat."

"Even if I drooled on you?"

"You have drooled on me several times before."

Will dropped his fork. "What? When? I didn't!"

Hannibal responded with a smirk, at which Will rolled his eyes. Hannibal continued gazing at Will until Will looked back.

"Wolves form packs and lions form prides," he said. "Predators who hunt together can often hunt down more and bigger prey."

Will laughed. "If you want me to hunt with you, you only have to ask." He raised his glass of juice like a glass of wine. "Meat is back on the menu."

Hannibal returned the toothy smile and clicked their glasses.

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